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MAMMA

CHAPTER I

A SEVENTIETH birthday cannot, in the nature of things, be generally a subject of congratulation to its possessor. If the three score and ten years that lie behind it have been pleasant, the reflection that they are for ever gone is not a merry one. If, on the contrary, they have been mainly unpleasant, the knowledge that so little space is left in which to repair their unkindness carries no elements of exhilaration. There is, of course, another way of looking at life and death, perhaps a loftier one ; but Mrs. Granard had never taken a very mountain-top survey of existence, and yet she was thoroughly enjoying that day which consigned her irrevocably to old age. At seventy no one can any longer, by any stretching of language, come under the head of the elderly. Few people, perhaps, enjoy ranging themselves under that ugliest of classifications, to which no complimentary adjective such as "blooming" youth and reverent age possess, have ever

been able to tack themselves. Yet the step over the border into what is frankly the final stage of the journey is seldom taken without some grave thoughts.

None such troubled Mrs. Granard. Never had she enjoyed her birthday more. Never had her gently resolute invalidhood sat more lightly upon her. Never had she more triumphantly verified the practical indestructibility of her renowned complexion. "Nothing lasts like a good skin! Look at Mamma's!" had become a household word among her daughters. Not one of the latter but had, at whatever personal inconvenience, come up to pay her tribute to the family idol.

Jane Swinderby, who lived in Lincolnshire, and whose husband was too selfish to allow her often to leave his fenny side, had torn herself away at the expense of a "row," and joined the adoring throng round the armchair.

"It is her seventieth birthday, and next year we may no longer have her," Jane had movingly said; but Bob was not moved, and had thought, and not only thought but regrettably said, that he felt sure that they would have her for many next years. And then Jane and he had quarrelled, and he had uttered several time-worn fleers about mothers-in-law, which he might as well have spared, since none the less did Jane—having made the gardener also angry by pillaging the stoves and conservatories—go up to London by the morning express.

Anne Baskerville never had any difficulty in getting away from her husband ; but she had a bad cold, and a house worry in the shape of an advanced daughter, who had lately elected to exchange her father's roof for an abominable little flat in Bloomsbury, and had entered into partnership with a foreign male manicurist, of whom no one knew anything but what his own advertisements revealed.

That her abode was sanctified by the presence of a young female surgeon—a cult for whom she had lately sprung upon her family—did not render the dispensation easier to bear. Both Anne's daughters were advanced, and she tried hard to be advanced too ; but they went so fast that it was not easy to keep up with them, and—as in the present case—she sometimes fell lamentably below their standard. Despite her chest cold, and the looming shadow of the manicurist, a morning train yielded Anne, too, up. She had not so far to travel as Jane, since she lived in pleasant Sussex.

Sarah Church, the Crœsus of the family, motored up from Kent. Sarah had been the plain Miss Granard, and the one that had made a bad marriage, giving herself to a man who had neither money, position, nor connection to sweeten the pill of his plebeian Jew-German name and singularly unattractive personality. But Sarah was a wily maid, who could see in any question the potential as well as actual factors, and in the dogged

pertinacity displayed by Otto Kirsch in ignoring her five first scornful refusals of his ringed hand, saw a likelihood of equal determination in him to conquer other gifts of fortune. Thereupon, on the sixth asking, she accepted him, and had never much rued it since. For Otto Kirsch was no longer Otto Kirsch. He was lengthened and Englished into Octavius Church. He was a power in the financial and philanthropic world; his rings had dwindled to one blameless signet, and Sarah was sent cards for intimate things at houses where her sisters never would have had a chance of showing their noses, even if they had wished it, which, being unambitious rural wives, they did not greatly desire to do.

The four sisters—of course one, Lucia, had remained unmarried to look after Mamma—assembled, as was their yearly wont, in Lucia's sitting-room, before proceeding in a body to lay the frankincense and myrrh of their annual offerings at their parent's feet.

Lucia's bower was in effect the back dining-room, and possessed all the objectionable features of such—cramping of space, baseness, and extreme limitation of prospect, and stinginess of light. Yet light was needed for the purpose which had brought the sisters together, that, namely, of reviewing and comparing their respective gifts. Had they not been passably amiable women, and, in the main, very

decently attached to each other, this survey might have been a trying one. It was so impossible to vie in costliness with Sarah! But, on the other hand, a consoling reflection annually occurred with soothing power to the other three. Sarah's taste was not faultless, and had not improved by contact with her Otto's Orientalism. Jane Swinderby was so seldom allowed a visit to London that she yearly committed the choosing of her birthday gift to Lucia, yearly was dissatisfied with the result, yearly tried to hide her dissatisfaction, and yearly failed. Jane had no children, which, perhaps, accounted for the cult of "Mamma" being even stronger in her than in the rest of the family.

Anne Baskerville was the poorest of the three married sisters, agricultural depression and a gay husband combining to keep her purse empty; but she was a beautiful worker, and, besides, Mamma never expected much of Anne. Mamma was always too sweet about anything one gave her; but somehow one always felt it in one's bones when she did not quite like one's offering.

That doubt about her offering which always assailed Mrs. Baskerville was on the present day complicated by the doubt as to whether she could govern her own countenance enough to make it conceal from her mother the havoc that her own cold and her daughter's manicurist had wrought in it. Mamma was always so sympathetic, but it

would be too selfish to allow one's petty worries to cloud the brightness of this, her day.

"Do try not to look so lugubrious, Anne," Sarah Church had said to her. "Your little worked picture is really very pretty, and, besides, you know that Mamma always says that it is the *intention* that she cares about!"

Anne's countenance did not clear under the influence of this not particularly happy form of consolation. It was all very well for Sarah, secure in the possession of that Russian enamel *étui*, which for once combined exquisite taste with obvious money value, to be magnanimous; but Mrs. Baskerville knew that her little silk shepherdess looked mean, and that Mamma would at once detect that she had been crying.

Meanwhile Jane Swinderby and Lucia were going through the modified painfulness of their annual difference of opinion over Lucia's choice.

"Of course, it is very nice in its way," Mrs. Swinderby said, surveying the bit of *bric-à-brac* in question without enthusiasm; "but do you think that it looks quite worth the money?"

"Do you suppose that I have kept back part of the price, like Ananias?" rejoined Lucia, with proper spirit.

Among the sisterhood, Lucia was held to be rather "short" in the temper. She had even been known, though rarely, to speak quite sharply to

Mamma. Jane was too fully occupied with inward disparagement of the gift chosen for her to be even aware of the tart query.

"It does not look quite like her, anyhow!" she said; then, laying a thin layer of gratitude over her discontent, added, "But I am sure you did your best!"

"Next year you shall choose for yourself," Lucia said; and then, each grasping her gift and her bouquet, they all went upstairs to the drawing-room.

Mamma received all their presents with her usual exquisite equality of gratitude. No one could have told from her manner that she was aware of the smallest difference in value or beauty between Sarah's offering and Lucia's. No one, except the recipient, ever took the slightest interest in Lucia's gifts. Out of her very small dress allowance—Mamma was always regretting that she could not make it larger—it was impossible that she could squeeze anything worth looking at. Her birthday presents always supplied some inglorious need, and were often woolly; but even the woollies called forth that little cry of surprised pleasure which made Mamma such a delightful person to whom to give a present. She always tried to make one feel that, however paltry, irrelevant, or superfluous one's offering might be, it was the one thing for which, these seventy rolling years, her spirit had pined; and, if

she did not always succeed, it was because one knew too well the unerring delicacy and certainty of her artistic *flair*.

But this year success was unqualified, and with the yearly load of Mamma's birthday presents temporarily off their minds—Mamma's present always *was* on one's mind, one did not quite know why—the four daughters of the new-made septuagenarian sat round her sofa, in the hope of enjoying a little family talk before the flood of gratulatory friends and acquaintances poured in. Mrs. Granard always inquired with an exact equality of interest after all her grandchildren. She was never huffy. If they did not come to see her, she always took it for granted that it was power, not inclination, that lacked ; and, indeed, those advanced young people were oftener to be found in attendance upon her than the friends who were acquainted with their theories about old age, and the right method of treating it would have expected.

"One can talk rationally to Granny, which is more than can be said of poor mother!" was an opinion enunciated by Gwendolen Baskerville, and acquiesced in by her cousins the Churches, although their ideas on many subjects were markedly different, and although the sentiment in this case had no great application to the Churches' filial relations, as they never willingly spoke to either of their parents.

Although Mrs. Baskerville had mentally resolved

that it would be criminal to dim the brightness of her mother's *fête* by intruding her own troubles upon it, yet the unhoped-for opportunity of a *tête-à-tête* afforded by the temporary absence from the room of her sisters, and the tone of solicitous tenderness in which Mrs. Granard said, "Your cold seems heavy, dear!" went near to break down her resolution and open the flood-gates of her tears.

"It is not only my cold!" she answered with a hesitating lugubriousness, which evidently foreran a confidence of some sort.

Mrs. Granard continued to regard her with tender attention out of eyes that were brighter than Anne's.

"Some home trouble?" she said in a touched voice, making it her own at once, as Mamma always did. Then, as if pulling herself together, "But I must not be selfish, and let you dwell upon it, whatever it is, just because it would interest me to hear about it! *To-day* I shall not allow you to think of anything but what is pleasant, and I have something to tell you that will amuse you."

Mrs. Baskerville's face did not give the idea, at the moment, that the muscles of laughter in it were those that would most easily come into play; but she hid as well as she could her disappointment in having to forego the advantage of Mamma's admirable judgment in helping her to emerge from the tight place into which her daughter Gwendolen's attitude

toward life had thrust her, and replied with galvanized cheerfulness—

"I am sure it will!"—"Poor Anne! she does not look as if anything could amuse her; but if one allows her to begin upon one of her interminable grievances——" was the parent's reflection.

It was a reflection that she would not have dropped into any human ear. Never was it possible for the married daughters to repeat, in moments of irritation, unflattering observations by Mamma in support of criticisms by themselves upon each other.

"You are going to have your wish, after all," Mrs. Granard said, with such a smile of radiant beneficence that a wild hope flashed across her daughter's mind that Mamma might have heard of the sudden death of the manicurist, and be radiating joy at the thought of the joy she was going to cause.

"My *wish?*" she repeated stupidly, not having even dared quite to formulate in her prayers the murderous petition, the favourable answer to which she might be about to be blessed with. "How?"

Mrs. Granard's face, from which age had not been able to chase an undoubted dimple, broke into a second smile.

"You are to have your way, as you always do where I am concerned. I am going to have my picture taken!"

This was a "drop" certainly from Anne's high

hopes ; yet even in so preoccupied a moment it *was* good news. Numerous as were the existing portraits of Mrs. Granard in her nymph-like youth, and Juno-prime, no presentment of her as she had appeared since her hair had made its judicious, not too sudden transit from gold to silver, existed.

"We want to have you as you are!" her daughters had said tenderly.

Whether the aspiration seemed to her to smack too much of the wish for a memorial portrait, Mrs. Granard had not risen much to the suggestion. But now she had sacrificed her own wishes, and come round to theirs, and she had chosen her birthday to tell them so. How like her! Mamma always did everything so gracefully.

"I *am* glad!" slipping a pocket-handkerchief, whose services would evidently now not be required, into her pocket. "*How* good of you! Have you told the others?"

"Not yet. I thought that you should be the first to hear it."

A little flush of pleasure tinged Anne's rather faded cheek. The small preference indicated made her feel better at once.

"Who is it to be?— Sargent?"

There seemed nothing improbable to Anne in the idea that the great artist in question should have asked her parent to sit to him, though Mrs. Granard did not reckon him among her acquaintances.

"Not quite"—in a tone of very gentle derision. "It is some one who is going to paint me for nothing—for his own pleasure."

"*How* good of you to allow him!"

Mrs. Granard laughed a little. Her children's infatuation about her often caused her a faint amusement.

"And as to painting you for nothing," continued Anne, in an aggrieved way, "you know how glad and thankful we should all have been to pay."

"I know how glad and thankful," replied her mother, prettily; "but I am not so sure about how *able*. Of course, Sarah—— But I should not have liked to owe it to one more than to another of you."

The sentence was eminently calculated to soothe the ever-smouldering jealousy in Mrs. Baskerville's breast of her elder sister's superior power of "doing things for Mamma," and with a cleared countenance she prepared to hear further details.

"He will come here. Of course, he saw at once that I could not go to his studio," with a slight passing glance at the historic invalid couch—Mamma never made any fuss about her ailments—"and he will let me pose as I like, talk or be silent, and has promised that I shall not be overtired."

This was all very well; but such wide compliance caused Anne a misgiving.

"Is he any one well known?—really clever?—an R.A.?"

There was no intentional irony in the juxtaposition of the two last queries.

"No; he is not an R.A.," replied Mrs. Granard, with that reluctant slowness which always marked her utterance when she was obliged to say anything that she did not think likely to be quite acceptable to her hearer. "In fact—he is—an amateur."

"An *amateur!*" with a very disappointed intonation. "Oh, he will not do you justice! I—we all—would far rather have nothing of you than a caricature."

Again the intending sitter laughed, showing some even white teeth, of which a very fair proportion were, and all looked, her own.

"At the worst we can put it into the fire, if we do not like it, when it is done; that is what he himself said!"

"*He himself said!* What a very unusual thing for an artist to say about his own work! He cannot think much of it!"

"I do not think that he does."

"Is he anybody that one ever heard of?" in a key of growing misgiving. "What is his name?"

"Ah, there you puzzle me! It is either Hostage or Hoskyns—a sort of name that says nothing to one. My memory is certainly not quite what it was."

"Oh, but indeed it is. Your memory is perfectly

marvellous. If you do not remember his name I am sure it is because it is not worth remembering."

Mrs. Granard lightly waved away discussion of her infirmities or her want of them—a subject on which, if her daughter had but known it, she was very much of that lady's way of thinking.

"Mrs. Castleton brought him one day: she had picked him up somewhere. I do not think she knew very much about him."

Anne's face had been steadily lengthening.

"It sounds rather—rather *risky*, doesn't it?"

"For the umbrellas and spoons, eh? I think that they will be pretty safe."

A very faint dryness in her mother's tone warned Anne that Mrs. Granard was growing bored by her daughter's objections, though she was far too exquisitely courteous to show it by any sign detectable by a strange ear. On the present occasion what a sweet *amende* she made at once for her infinitesimal snub!

"You dear, fussy thing!" she said, laying her beautiful hand—a triumph of nature and manicure—for a second upon her daughter's sleeve. "He can't run away with me and my sofa! All that concerns me about him is that he undoubtedly possesses this curious talent for catching a likeness and dashing off these clever impressionist sketches, and that he seems to have taken a fancy to my poor old face."

"How odd of him!"

Mrs. Baskerville was the stupidest of the quartette, and this withering ejaculation was the nearest she could get to irony. After a moment she added—

"Is he—is he like a gentleman?"

"H'm! Quite enough for our purpose!"

A slight silence, during which Mrs. Granard took up Anne's bouquet—she hoped that it was Anne's—and smelt it tenderly. Inwardly she wondered when Sarah and Jane were coming back.

CHAPTER II

THE afternoon was drawing towards its close, and the last carriageful of congratulators had driven away. Only a little tired,—at least she would not own to more; smothered in expensive flowers, and surrounded with presents, Mrs. Granard lay. Every one had said or implied that she grew younger every time they saw her. Those who knew her well enough to do so had told her that she did not look a day over fifty. One had gone so far as to whisper—but she was gently chidden for it—that Mrs. Granard might, as far as appearance went, be Mrs. Baskerville's daughter.

It is a curious fact that by the bulk of the world longevity in itself is looked upon as a merit to receive recognition and—if the station in life of its possessor be low enough—pecuniary recompense even from royalty. Mrs. Granard had done nothing wonderful *yet;* but as she lay on her sofa, pink with satisfaction, framed in cobwebby lace, diffusing joy and perfume—she was always beautifully scented—there seemed nothing unlikely in the aspiration uttered by several admirers, that she might be spared to bless her children for another thirty years.

"I had quite forgotten him," she was saying, in a voice that her daughters—once more left in possession—insisted was a little hoarse.

As she spoke she passed a visiting card, which had just been put into her hand, to Anne, who was nearest her.

"It is the person whom we were speaking of. You may say what you please, Anne; but my memory is not what it was. I had quite forgotten that I had made an appointment with this Mr.—Mr.—I cannot remember his name, for to-day, to arrange about my sittings. Apparently Lucia forgot it too."

There was not the faintest shade of upbraiding in Mrs. Granard's voice, but at once three pairs of reproachful eyes were turned upon the culprit.

"How *could* you?"

"What *were* you thinking of?"

"It is quite impossible that Mamma can see him now! It would knock her up for the whole evening!"

"I had better go and speak to him, I suppose," Lucia said, making no attempt at self-exculpation, "if you will tell me what to say. I suppose"—turning to the servant, who waited for orders—"that you have shown Mr. Hatton into my room?"

As the door shut behind her youngest daughter, Mrs. Granard "sketched" a gesture of deprecation to the rest of the family.

"I hope I have not made an enemy for life of him; but I really do not feel quite up to him to-night; and he cannot complain, as I have sent him Lucia instead!"

They all laughed. The idea of poor Lucia being considered in the light of an equivalent for their parent struck them all, including that parent herself, as frankly ludicrous.

Lucia was not naturally humble. In other surroundings she would probably have thought herself even nicer looking and more intelligent than she really was. But in Lucia's position humility was not a grace, but a necessity. How could any one whose fate, whose glory it was to be always standing in the grateful shade cast by Mamma, think anything but meanly of herself?

On the present occasion she was rather tired with having had to talk all the afternoon to the bores of the party, and entertain the children whose parents had brought them, with little nosegayed hands, to be edified by the spectacle of beautiful old age! If she had thought about it, she would rather have had a half-hour's rest before the evening splendours and labours of the *fête* set in, than be sent to smooth the feathers of a probably angry and unknown semi-gentleman—the class of all others most ready to take offence. But what was the use of thinking about it, since it could not be?

She did not; but went matter-of-factly into her

gloomy boudoir, and—of course, since Mamma had been obliged to be rude to him, she must shake hands with him—held out five not very willing fingers to the stranger. He took them, making at the same time an awkward bow, which she yet felt at once to be not shy.

"I was beginning to think that your flunkey had forgotten to tell you that I was here!"

Lucia shuddered. How deeply he damned himself in his first sentence! "*Your flunkey!*" He could not be even half a gentleman! Well, perhaps it was better to be none at all than half a one. And after all, what did it matter?

"I have to apologize to you for my mother," she answered, when she had swallowed the inevitable gasp that had followed his utterance. "She is so very sorry not to be able to see you to-day, but she has unfortunately had an extremely tiring afternoon." Not for worlds would she desecrate Mamma's *fête* by alluding to it as the cause of her exhaustion, to such a hearer!

Mr. Hatton expressed no regret at his intending sitter's fatigue, nor did he look at all offended at the slight to himself. He only said reflectively—

"From the little I saw of your mother I should have thought that it would take a good deal to tire her."

Again Lucia winced. "*Your mother!*" What impertinence! And what did he mean by that

offensive implication of Mamma's apparent robustness?

To look coldly interrogative was her only parry to such a thrust.

"I mean," he said, evidently with no consciousness of having given offence, or reluctance to explain, "that though she was lying down, she appeared to be in very good health."

It was odd that, after such a training as Lucia's, she should still be capable of bursts of temper. But she was, and, being at once fagged and *froisséed*, she indulged in one now. The grey eyes, which in her own opinion—no one else seemed to have time to look at them—went not ill with her sleek dark hair, shot out two steely sparks.

"I am sure that you can't be aware of it; but you are implying that my mother is a *malade imaginaire!*"

He looked back at her with a surprised directness—surprised apparently to find that she was not of the same opinion.

"*Is* she ill?"

"She has been an invalid for years."

This deplorable announcement was made in a manner which conveyed, even to a person capable of talking of a footman as a *flunkey*, that the subject was not to be pursued, and there was a pause.

Lucia broke it. The sooner she attacked the

distasteful subject of her errand, the sooner it would be over.

"I believe that you are kind enough to propose to paint a portrait of my mother?"

The words came very reluctantly. How *could* Mamma lay herself under an obligation to such a bounder?

"It is no great kindness."

In this she cordially agreed with him; but, as she could not *say* so, she remained silent.

"I am not much more than a beginner. I have had no technical training, so it is an advantage to me to get hold of a good subject, and of course your mother *is* a good subject."

His hearer bit a lip, and slightly bent a disdainful head. "*Your mother*" again! and that patronizing accent of admission that she deserved to be a model for his 'prentice brush. Mamma would never be able to stand him for five minutes. The strong conviction that Mr. Hatton's ejectment would follow immediately upon the first sitting granted to him enabled Mamma's daughter to arrange, with business-like calm, the date and details of that first and, as she confidently believed, *last* appointment. She ended with the admonishment—

"We have always to be very careful not to overtire her."

He nodded—too familiarly, she thought, and with a slight, yet evident, though—as Lucia had to

confess to herself—probably unconscious expression of disbelief on his face.

"Oh, it will be all right!"

Why did he not now go? Since they were about to be indebted to him—the thought was a distasteful one—Lucia supposed that it was not within the limits of her embassy to dismiss him like a tradesman. Yet, without some pressure, it appeared unlikely that she would get rid of him. She herself had never throughout the interview sat down, so that she could not give him a hint by standing up. Besides, she felt sure that he was not the sort of person who would see a hint, or take it if he did.

"At one time of my life I used to hear your name pretty often."

He had come a step nearer, and had the impertinence to be looking interested in her, which was what people did not often do. His advance had brought him into a better light, and she saw him more distinctly—saw how very unlike any preconceived notion or actual experience of an artist he appeared. You could not say that he was ill-looking, but it was impossible to connect him in idea with a studio and a mahl-stick. Rather he conveyed the impression of roving, tanned out-of-doorness.

"When I saw your mother the other day, I kept wondering whether you could be the same Granards I had heard of?"

"Really!"

It would be impossible to convey less of interest in this piece of information than Miss Granard managed to infuse into her voice. Yet her labour was obviously wasted.

"But when you came into the room just now, I no longer had any doubt. I knew you at once from your photographs."

There was interest enough now of an angry, incredulous sort.

"When could you possibly have seen my photographs?"

"In one of them you were sitting down, and in the other you were standing up; and, of course, they were taken when you were younger than you are now"—he went on, and something made her feel that he was perfectly aware of her ire, and that it amused him—"but I should have recognized you anywhere."

"I think there must be some mistake. I do not often give my photographs."

Plenty of quiet dignity sounded in the words, but to her own ear they conveyed an idea of falsity. To refuse implies being asked, and how very little demand—now she came to think of it—there had ever been for her image! Every one was naturally anxious to possess one of Mamma's beautiful, expensive, and, if that were possible, idealized portraits; but Lucia's! How long was

it since she had even sat, except to be travestied in a group, or pilloried by some nephew or niece in an early stage of amateur enthusiasm? She perfectly well remembered those long-ago presentments of herself to which her new companion was alluding; the sitting and the standing one; remembered—was it likely that she should forget?—the occasion which brought them into being, and the person for whom they had been destined. But what possible connection could there be between them, him, and this irrelevant outsider, who was professing an impudent familiarity with them?

"Yet I did see them, and I do not think he had stolen them."

The red ran up into her face.

"Do you mean that it was a man who showed you my photographs?"

"Yes, it was a man. I do not happen to have met any of your lady friends."

She cast a disgusted glance at him, letting pass, almost without mental reprobation, the new proof of his under-breeding contained in the "lady friends."

"I am quite at a loss——" she began, and stopped.

"Did you ever know any one of the name of Carruthers?"

He drove his question through her like a knife, standing quite close, as if resolved that the always

dark and now darkening room should not filch from him the effect of his words.

She could not be said to start, yet he was answered before her slow reply came.

"Yes, I once knew some one of the name of Carruthers."

Apparently it seemed easier to repeat as nearly as possible his words, than to vary the phrase.

"Well, it was he who showed me your photos."

She wished, with a vague distaste, that he had said "photographs;" but that was only on the surface of her mind. Beneath? Yes, she had once known some one of the name of Carruthers, though for fourteen years his name had never been mentioned to her by her family. Yet, he had not done anything very disgraceful. He had only asked her to marry him, when, of course, he ought to have known that she could not possibly leave Mamma. He was the only man in Lucia's thirty-one years' experience who had never seemed to see Mamma when she, Lucia, was present. He had asked her so strenuously that he had actually made it seem possible to her, and there had been a ring and several kisses, and a few plans.

The whole area covered by these conditions had been only four days, and then the three married sisters had rushed in and rushed up. Sarah, who was in Spain, had taken a special train the moment that she heard of it, and they had sat and stood

round her, and demonstrated to her the *monstrosity* of leaving Mamma quite alone in her state of health. Of course, had Lucia been thirty-one, as she was now, instead of heedless selfish seventeen, she would have seen the criminality of the proposal as clearly as did the other three. Mamma had not said much, but she had just drooped and flagged. And Jane had been deputed to interview the young man ; and he had been violent, and not gentlemanlike in the things he had said about Mamma, which Jane would not repeat even to Anne and Sarah ; and the ring had been returned, and the kisses had *not* been returned, and the whole thing had blown over, and there never had been anything at all like it again ; and Sarah had given Lucia twenty pounds on her next birthday to buy herself a fur stole ; and Mamma had bloomed gently out again ; and everybody, with perhaps one exception, was pleased.

The exception was seventeen, and would perhaps not have been very hard hit if any other heart-history had come to erase from her memory her first abortive romance. Of late she had grown *almost* to persuade herself that she was glad to have been stopped from doing a flagitious thing. Yet sometimes, and oddly enough at more frequent intervals since the affair had receded into far distance, Lucia had caught herself wondering what sort of a Lucia she would have been by now, if she had been allowed to follow her wicked bent and depart with

Tommy Carruthers to the Colonies. Twice in the course of those portentous four days he had made her call him "Tommy!" and what an extraordinary sensation it had been! These speculations were not to be encouraged, but she sometimes drifted into them, especially when she was tired or over-weighted by the consciousness of the contrast between Mamma's brilliancy and her own drabness. Sometimes she wondered if she had been *born* drab, but she always answered herself in the affirmative, since, if she had not, to whom was the guilt of her neutral tint assignable? The question led straight to a blasphemy. If it was blasphemy to suspect, even distantly, that it was Mamma who had made her drab, it was no less a profanity to suffer this offensive stranger's coarse curiosity to rummage among the secrets of her past. Yet how to stop him? She ought to make some indifferent comment upon his communication.

"It must have been a long time ago!" she said, with slow care to be colourless.

"You forget the circumstance?"

The brutal directness of his tongue and eyes seemed to command an answering directness in her.

"No, I now remember it."

Perhaps it was pleasure at having forced the admission from her that kept him silent. But, at all events, he remained so, and it was she who, unwillingly, yet as under some compulsion, spoke next.

"If it is not an impertinent question, may I ask where and when you met Mr. Carruthers?"

He wrinkled his straight eyebrows as if in the effort to recall a blurred memory.

"*When?* Well, it must have been ten good years ago! *Where?* We knocked up against each other first at Klondyke, and after that I came across him at Johannesburg, and then again at San Francisco! You will be thinking"—with a rather self-complacent smile—"that I must have been a rolling stone?"

"Indeed, I was not!"

Her answer conveyed, as clearly as was consistent with perfect civility, that her mind had better furniture than speculations as to the details of his vagabondage. Yet, once again, it was she who had to take the initiative, if the subject were not to be dropped.

"Did you see much of him?—of Mr. Carruthers?"

Again his brows drew together. "I did what I could for him!" Then, with a return of his self-gratulatory manner, "I have always been willing to help a lame dog over a stile! A fellow-feeling makes us wondrous kind, doesn't it?"

She would have been deeply offended by the impertinence of his bracketting her with himself, and the implication that she knew from personal experience how lame dogs felt, if the phrase applied

to her lover had not filled her with a misgiving which overrode any sense of personal offence.

"Why do you speak of Mr. Carruthers as a 'lame dog'?" she asked. "Was he—was he—not doing well?"

Her companion's garrulity seemed arrested. "No, he was not." A silence; but this time Hatton broke it. "Poor chap! he had had a knock-down blow—a *facer!* and I do not think he had been quite right in his head since. At least, that was the way that I accounted for him."

Having said so much, why did not he go on? Why compel her to ask falteringly, after a full minute had gone by—

"Was it in America or Africa that it happened?"

"Neither. It was in England!"

CHAPTER III

Was an interruption to be welcomed? Lucia could scarcely have told. At all events, one came. A prospecting head appeared round the door. An assured voice asked, "Any admittance?" and, without waiting for an answer, the owner of both and of a hat calculated to give confidence to any wearer, entering, broke the unpleasant *tête-à-tête*. One ought always to make a point of looking in upon poor old Lucia in her dark hole whenever one paid a visit to Grandmamma!

"Am I wanted? Is Mamma asking for me?"

The formula was a very familiar one both to speaker and hearer.

"Far from it!" laughing. "You would be very much *de trop!* I withdrew gracefully when her old admirer, Admiral de Vigne, turned up. I left him kissing her hand, and telling her she was fifteen. She really *is* a wonder! And I never remember her so full of beans on any birthday! She does not even pretend to be tired!"

The broad smile on a fashionably wide mouth, with which the girl gave the bulletin of her

grandmother's health, included the stranger in its good-humoured generality, and was reflected rather ironically on his face. It was certainly in unluckily startling contrast with Lucia's laboured explanation of the cavalier treatment he and his appointment had met with. An effort to reconcile the contending statements was not very successful.

"Mamma did not expect Admiral de Vigne. When I left her she meant to rest till dinner. He must have been let in by mistake!"

Gwendolen Baskerville—for it was she—did not reply in words, but a twist of her liberally cut lips and a smile in her roving green eyes conveyed to her aunt a lenient contempt for the innocence which could be taken in by so simple a fraud!

The look of amusement on her face deepened, as, glancing from one to the other of the countenances before her, she gathered what had happened. Poor Lucia had evidently been telling one of her compulsory lies, and she, Gwendolen, had unintentionally shown her up!

"So I thought I would come and have a little talk about the portrait with you and Mr. ——"

She looked him full in the face, frankly confessing that she had forgotten his name. He supplied it briefly—

"Hatton."

"I quite envy you! I always wish that I could draw when I am with Granny. She is so pictorial."

"She is a very fine old lady."

At the shape taken by this not very enthusiastic encomium another delighted smile lit up Miss Baskerville's odd collection of features.

"What scale is it to be on? I do hope you will be able to introduce her hands. They are the most characteristic things about her! They do not look as if they had ever done anything! But they really are very beautiful in their way! It is magnanimous of me to allow it, since nothing will induce her to employ *us*."

He had been staring at her with the silent directness of a savage—at her towering height, her magnificent colouring, her green slits of eyes, and voluble mouth. At the last clause of her sentence he found blunt speech.

"I do not think that I know what you are talking about!"

"We are manicurists, my partner and I; and I have tried to persuade Granny to give us her patronage. Of course, she would be invaluable as an advertisement! But she is quite hopeless."

"I do not think we need go into that now," Lucia said irritably, shivering apprehensively at the probable outbreak of underbred familiarity which would follow this needless and tasteless confidence. But she spoke in vain.

"I never lose an opportunity of doing a stroke of business," the girl said, addressing the stranger with

wilful directness. "So if you have any friend who is looking out for a manicurist, perhaps you will mention us to him. I do not happen to have one of our cards with me, but if you will give me your address, I will send you one."

To disconcert Miss Baskerville was practically impossible. Had it been otherwise that feat must have been accomplished now.

Hatton contemplated her in perfect silence for several seconds, then said, without any of the familiarity that Lucia had dreaded, but with as scant courtesy—

"I have been out of England a great many years, and though I am not a stupid chap, I find people talking a language that I have no clue to. I am afraid I should not know what to do with your card."

"I will send it all the same," cried she, brazenly, though reddening a little.

He did not seem to hear her. He had turned to Lucia, holding out, as a matter of course, his unwelcomed hand.

"Twelve o'clock to-morrow, then?"

He was gone.

Lucia subsided into a chair. "Well," she said in a voice of acute vexation, "you have succeeded where I failed! You have got rid of him! But whether it was worth while to expose yourself to such a snub from such a person is another question."

"You are always so high and haughty," replied the other, quite unruffled by the misadventure alluded to. "If you were in business, you would know that it does not do to be too thin-skinned."

"Did he look like a person who wanted to be manicured?" Lucia asked, still at a white heat of chafing. "He had not the faintest idea what the word meant."

"You never know. The most unlikely people come to see us. At all events, he shall have the chance. You have got his address, of course?"

Miss Granard's answer to this request was to leave the room; while her niece cried after her with exasperating cheerfulness—

"Would you like to know how much we banked last week?"

CHAPTER IV

The reception by her aunt of Miss Baskerville's question did not prevent her putting it again, and this time to the whole table at the family dinner which always crowned Grandmamma's *fête*.

"How much do you think we banked last week?" she inquired resonantly.

Grandmamma received the question with a smile of acquiescent interest, which looked, and was meant to look, like approbation. Grandmamma always implied approbation of all her grandchildren's actions, however foolish or iniquitous. Mrs. Baskerville received it with a half-strangled writhe, and Otto Church with the facetiously malicious suggestion of a sum far outside the bounds of possibility.

A little manœuvring was always necessary, on the occasions of family gatherings, to prevent Otto from sitting near Mamma, as his Teutonic pleasantries always made her feel faint, though he was far from suspecting this fact, owing to the perfection of his mother-in-law's manners. It was a manœuvre that needed an added subtlety by the necessity of hiding it from Sarah, and it was always

entrusted to Lucia—an item in the miscellaneous baggage of her duties which she could have gladly dispensed with. To-day—perhaps in consequence of a mind less concentrated than usual upon its work—Miss Granard's manipulation of her wires had not been quite so delicate as usual, and something in Sarah's face hinted that she had caught a glimpse of the ropes which had pushed her financier to the other end of the table.

Gwendolen feigned not to hear her uncle's cheapening answer to her triumphantly thrown-out challenge. One often had to pretend not to hear Otto when he was in a holiday vein, and repeated her resonant query—

"How much do you suppose we banked last week?"

"I am sure it was a very large sum," said Sarah, taking upon herself to answer the question, shirked through ignorance or disinclination by the rest of the company; and the tone of her voice left no doubt in Lucia's mind that she had grasped the anti-Otto manœuvre, and was ruffled for the evening; "but"—she lowered her voice, and leant across her intervening brother-in-law, Swinderby—"do not you think it would be better to postpone the subject till——?" A slight glance at the servants finished the sentence.

Gwendolen wriggled her features into a good-humoured grimace.

"All right," she answered, relieving her disappointment by a *sotto-voce* remark to the young Guardsman Church, who had taken her in to dinner, that it was too bad of his mother to rob her of a possible addition to her *clientèle*.

"They imitate us in everything else. Why not in having nice hands?"

"So I hear that you are going to have your portrait painted?" said Mr. Swinderby, raising his voice to address the heroine of the feast, which was irrational, since he knew that she was not deaf, and he did it only because he did not like the Churches, and was annoyed with Sarah for having leant across him.

Mrs. Granard always ignored ill manners, and showed her consciousness of them only by a little added courtesy on her own part.

"Yes; is not it exciting? How kind of you to be interested about it!"

"You will like him, Granny," broke in the unconquered Gwendolen; "he is a real savage."

"He is a terrible bounder!" Lucia said in a tired, low voice to her neighbour, Zillah Church. "Mamma will never be able to stand him; and I do not see how one is to protect her against him."

One of Otto Church's few virtues—which, as is often the case, stirred his family to more wrath than did any of his many vices—was a sturdy cleaving to his race and kindred; and his daughters Zillah and

Keturah went through life branded with the names of the old mother who had passed her existence under the shade of three balls in the Juden-Gasse of a town in the Fatherland, and of the old aunt who had helped to rear that mother's brood. Zillah, it is true, had succeeded in sliding among her friends into Zélie, and Keturah into Kitty; but in neither case did they venture upon these transmutations in their father's hearing. Yet he had himself, under the persuasion of his wife, and from a conviction that the change would be socially advantageous to him, consented to become Octavius to the general public.

Zillah shrugged her shoulders. She was faintly sorry for her grandmother, since she shared the hereditary admiration; but it was only a washed-out sympathy that a person labouring under such poignant troubles of their own could give to any other's woe.

"Granny is very lucky if she has nothing worse to worry her," she answered sombrely.

Lucia did not press the subject; she was aware by long experience of the superlative, yet perfectly unconscious selfishness of the young. A person immersed in the early chapters of the Book of Life is like the reader of an enthralling novel, whose eyes, ears, and heart are blind, deaf, and insensible to any outside sights, sounds, or emotions. Also Miss Granard knew, from the frequent receipt of

confidences about them, that Zillah's troubles were far from imaginary.

If Care sat behind some of the solid mahogany dining-chairs, it certainly did not behind the wide-armed and well-cushioned one where reclined the heroine of the day. She was undoubtedly enjoying herself very much. Her favourite son-in-law, Freddy Baskerville, beside her, and neglecting his dinner—he was always a small and careless eater—to ensure her having a good time, feeding her ear with choicest morsels of Club and House of Commons gossip, and short, sometimes *risqué*, but never too *risqué* anecdotes, to utter which, in most unnecessary care for his daughters, he lowered his agreeable voice.

At the end of dinner all the company drank to Mrs. Granard's health and long life; Otto Church being metaphorically held down by force, to prevent his getting on his legs and making one of those dreadful funny speeches which always left Granny really ill. The daughters drank the toast and uttered their aspirations with loving quivers in their voices; the young people with rather *distrait* friendliness; and Bob Swinderby with sullen shyness. He had followed his wife up to London after all, despite the "row," because he could not bear to be alone. But, as usual, Baskerville did best of all. The toast was—an immemorial custom—drunk standing; and before any one sat down again,

Freddy had dropped a light kiss on the top of his mother-in-law's Point d'Angleterre head-dress, saying charmingly that "on his Mamma's birthday a good boy was always allowed a treat."

Poor Mrs. Baskerville's eyes filled with delighted tears at this beautiful inspiration, and the longest of his long daughters cried out patronizingly—

"Well done, Little One!"

It was the name by which the Miss Baskervilles usually addressed their parent ever since they had begun to tower above him. To their mother they were in the habit of applying the name of the last foolish old woman in comic opera or farce who had taken their fancy.

Both Gwendolen, her sister, and brothers were really attached to their parents, and, at the same time thoroughly and incorrigibly disrespectful; whereas the young Churches, who one and all cordially disliked both father and mother, invariably treated them with icy civility. Jane Swinderby was in the habit of saying that when she heard the Baskervilles and saw the Churches, she thanked Providence for not having plagued her with any children.

After dinner things did not go quite so well. That perseverance which had made Otto what he was, carried him, despite all efforts to the contrary, to the side of Mamma's chair. As it would have been impossible to dislodge him without seriously

wounding Sarah ; and as it was equally impossible that Mamma could put up with the infliction—Mamma never could stand him for more than five minutes at a time—there was nothing for it but that she should confess herself "stupidly tired," "worn out with too much spoiling," and retire to her bower.

The moon of the evening having withdrawn, her satellites more or less quickly dispersed. Gwendolen Baskerville lingered last. Lucia wished that she would go, but as things that Lucia wished seldom happened, she sat resignedly, merely yawning without too much disguise. One need never be afraid of hurting Gwen's feelings !

That young lady had several times announced her intention of immediate departure, consequent on a promise to look in at an evening party given at his lodgings by a medical student, a friend of Jessie's. (Jessie was the intending doctor with whom Gwendolen had lately set up her tent-pole.) But she had already kept the hansom waiting for twenty minutes, and she still showed no signs of hurry. At last she stood up.

"Well, you really must not keep me any longer. Jessie will think me such a fraud ! At what time to-morrow do you say the first sitting is to be ?"

"Do you mean to assist at it ?"

"Yes, certainly."

"Why, may I ask?"

"I want to see more of that savage; he is so unlike anything one ever met before, and I am determined to get hold of those ugly hands of his, despite his impolite refusal to trust them to us."

"You never will."

"Why shouldn't I? Come now, this requires explanation! Let us sit down again and thresh it out quietly;" provokingly suiting the action to the word.

"Your cab has already been waiting half an hour."

The girl made an airy gesture of indifference. "Let it wait another half! I am so stony-broke that sixpence more or less makes no difference."

"Well, then, I will wish you good night, and send the servants to bed. Do not forget the electric light when you finally make up your mind to go."

"Why be cross?" in a tone of sweet reasonableness. "Is it my fault that Otto is a cad, and that he sent Granny early to bed? After all, it is the best place for her after such a tiring day. Is it my fault that Zillah has had to allow that *sweep* Silbermein to pay her bridge debts again? Come now, is it?"

"Poor little Zillah!" Lucia ejaculated, in a voice that was regretful and tired, but neither surprised nor much shocked.

Daily intercourse with a group of up-to-date nieces had brought Miss Granard into a half-acquiescent intimacy with the follies of the day.

"Poor little Zillah! Has she come to that again?"

"I am not keeping you up to pity Zillah," Gwendolen said impatiently—herself no bridge-player, though too easy-going to "damn a vice she had no mind to," she had not much compassion to spare for its victims—"but to ask you what the Savage had been saying to you to make you *pink?* You can't deny that you *were* pink."

CHAPTER V

But Lucia, though always to be depended upon for sympathy and help in scrapes, whether venial or mortal, was not always to be counted on as sit-uponable. She gave out unexpected sparks now.

"If I was 'pink,' it was at hearing you so pungently and deservedly snubbed—and by such a cad!"

"If he was a cad, why were you talking to him so intimately?"

"*Intimately!*"

"Yes, you were standing close together."

"That was my misfortune!" with a little gesture of revolted pride.

"You were talking of something interesting—more interesting than dear Granny's portrait—nothing will persuade me that you were not; and I have been racking my brains to think what it could be. Come now—we always tell each other our little secrets—what was it?"

Miss Baskerville's aunt had known by long experience her niece's talent for "getting things"

out of people, a talent that lay, not in any subtle process of "worming," but in a brutal directness of inquiry, that took rebuffs in its stride. Lucia felt that she was reluctantly going to succumb to it; but she made one more struggle to resist.

"He was talking to me—I thought it extremely impertinent of him"—with a revival of indignation—"about a subject that could not possibly interest you."

"There are very few subjects that do not."

"I know that you are very inquisitive."

Gwendolen leant back in her chair, with a smile of amused self-complacency on her wide mouth.

"Yes, I have an enlightened curiosity about most things." Silence save of the nightly traffic roaring and ringing and horning past outside. "A topic that could not interest me, but that made you angry and pink!" Gwendolen said, in the reflective tone of one labouring over a "light" in a newspaper puzzle. "What could it be?"

"I suppose that I shall never get you out of the house until I tell you?" Miss Granard said with an annoyed laugh. "Well, then, Mr. Hatton was giving me news of a friend of mine whom I have not met for many years!"

"Was that all? And he knew her?"

A flash of grim amusement darted across

Lucia's mind. None of her young people could credit her with the possible possession of a male friend.

"He was a man."

"H'm! One of Granny's victims, I suppose?"

"No, he did not like Mamma."

The admission of so outrageous a possibility falling from the lips of Lucia would have been enough in itself to stagger a hearer with a much less keen nose for a scent than Gwendolen's; and something in the tone, positive and unprotesting against such a crime, which conveyed it, deepened the impression of astonishment in her niece's mind.

"*A—man—friend—of—yours—whom—it—made—you—pink—to—hear—of?*" Gwendolen said slowly, with a hyphen indicative of stupefaction between each word, and an incredulous note of interrogation at the end.

Lucia laughed. The idea presented was evidently one impossible of assimilation.

"*A lover, in fact!*" continued Gwen, leaning forward, while her eyes opened to the size and roundness of half-crowns.

"I believe that at the time he would have called himself so."

"Well, I *am* blessed!"

The expression culled probably from the vocabulary of one of Jessie's medical *clientèle*, called forth none of the expressions of disapprobation

usually produced by the borrowed gems of language which sometimes adorned Miss Baskerville's speech. It fell on silence.

"But if he was your lover, why did not he marry you? In your youth, people who loved each other were always obliged or supposed to marry each other, weren't they?"

The implication conveyed was that in the twentieth century we have risen into a clearer ether. In the girl's tone there was also an unintentional intonation of astonishment that any one could ever have been credited with cherishing designs of the nature indicated upon "poor old Lucia."

"*In my youth!*" the latter repeated, without surprise or anger.

She did not quarrel with her niece's view of the infinite distance that separated her from the epoch alluded to, but a sort of speculative wonder trailed across her mind as to why the period, which in other women's cases spread over a dozen years should in hers have been reduced to four days? She certainly had been as young as anybody for four days. There was more of a grey curiosity than of acute pain in the thought, which indeed was an habitual one, but to-night a little pain had crept in too.

"He wished to marry me."

"You do not say so? How interesting!"

The reply was one of such lively wonder that

poor Lucia's long-dormant woman's vanity put a pinch of sharpness into her voice.

"It is really true!"

"I do not doubt it for a moment!" with an unconscious air of being possessed of the faith that removes mountains. "And you?"

At that the other paused a moment. "I wished it too."

"Then, why are you here? Why not in a home of your own, surrounded by a happy circle of little Lucias and——?"

She paused, as if expecting the name of the unknown quantity to be supplied, and, without intending it, she laughed a little.

"If you are going to treat the subject in your usual vein of low comedy, I think, if you do not mind, we will stop discussing it."

"I do not mean to be either low or high comic," returned the other, penitently. "I was made low comic to look at, and I suppose I try to talk and act *de suite*. But—who was he?"

"His name would convey nothing to you."

"How can you possibly tell that? I come across a great number and variety of personalities in my meteoric career."

No answer.

"But if you will not tell me his name, tell me at least why you did not marry him?"

"Because I could not leave Mamma."

Gwendolen broke into an incredulous giggle. "That sounds like a heroine of the Fifties; but even in the Fifties did there ever really exist a woman who gave up a man she loved because she would not leave her Mamma?"

"I was not quite born in the Fifties, but I did it."

"And Granny let you?"

"Yes."

A pause; then, "Dear old thing, how disgracefully selfish of her!"

There is nothing makes a person so angry as having a thought which they have been horrifiedly chasing like a rat or a scorpion out of his or her own mind, suddenly presented to them by another.

"How dare you say such things? How *could* I have left her? How *could* she have done without me? Who would have looked after her?"

Her aunt's angry eyes and indignant words had brought Gwendolen face to face with the family tradition, which she had hitherto accepted without examination. A closer view of it began to show that it bore scrutiny no better than many others.

"Granny would always have found people to look after her!" she answered thoughtfully; and the trail of the sceptic seemed for the first time to

be traceable across the Granard gospel. A dim consciousness of this gave new fire to the tired Crusader who had fought under its banner so long.

"It is all very fine talking like that," she cried out; "but who was there? Your mother, your aunts, had their husbands and children to look after. She would have been absolutely deserted."

Lucia got up as she spoke, and began to walk up and down the room, as if it was impossible to face the terrible picture of the results of filial impiety which she had conjured up, in an attitude of repose.

Her niece uttered a slow whistling sound which, for no assignable reason, conveyed incredulity.

"Why are we raking all this up?" continued the other, stopping in upbraiding ire before her hearer. "Why are you forcing me to recall—just in order to titillate your curiosity—the one occasion in my life on which I was upon the very edge of committing a crime!"

"A *crime!* Come!!"

"It *would* have been a crime! It would have killed her!"

For a moment Miss Baskerville's mouth kept its whistling shape, then it bent itself to articulate words.

"It would take a great deal to kill Granny! It is my belief that she will be the last woman, the last

man having gladly laid down his life from exhaustion in fetching and carrying for her!"

"I can never be thankful enough for having been stopped in time!" went on the other at high pressure, and expressing her gratitude with the more emphasis because she was no longer quite sure of feeling it. "I should have carried about a lifelong remorse."

"I still think that it was incredibly selfish of Granny!"

"I will not allow you to say so! She was not in the least to blame! She simply began to fade away! She would have died of misery and neglect!"

There was such a grotesque contrast between this picture and Miss Baskerville's late remembrance of her grandmother, queening it in bloom and beauty among her faded daughters, that Gwendolen was only just able to throttle the laugh which would have jarred so painfully on her aunt's strung feelings.

"I was too much blinded by passion, I suppose"—the unfamiliar word summoned a faint blush —"to realize what I was doing, but happily the others could see for me. They all rushed up. Sarah was in Spain. She even took a special train."

"How expensive!"

"Even then they could not get me to see

it. I believe that I must have been off my head."

"On the contrary, I should say that you were more on it than you have ever been since."

"Looking back now, it seems incredible."

During the last six hours this statement had become partially untrue.

"And he? How did he take it?"

Lucia's lips quivered. What painful life the withered idyll of fourteen years ago was putting on again!

"I—I had rather not say."

"Oh! come now!" in a voice of acute and coaxing inquisitiveness: "you have gone so far that you may as well go a little further. What did he do?"

"He said things—things about Mamma that I ought never to forgive!"

"Poor dear Granny! But I sympathize with him, warmly."

A pause. When next Miss Baskerville spoke there was no trace of the comic element in her voice or words.

"And they left you to your fate! They stood by and left you to your fate! They, with their husbands and children—not that I think they are much to be congratulated on either—left you to the fate they had forced on you! And what a fate!"

"Do not pity me!" cried Lucia, with a choked violence in eye and manner. "If I ever thought it a sacrifice, I have long been bitterly ashamed of having done so. It has been a high privilege to dedicate my life to Mamma. Do you think I would have changed it if I could, for an existence spent with Otto or Bob Swinderby, or even with your father?"

"I am not sure that the Little One shines particularly in the marital relation," his daughter interjected leniently; and there fell another silence, while yet one more sixpenn'orth of fare added itself to the waiting hansom outside.

"And then?"

"Then?"

"What happened?"

"Nothing."

"He went away?"

"Yes."

"And you never saw him again?"

"Never."

"And he never wrote to you?"

"Once."

"Oh, *do* show me the letter!"

"It does not exist."

"And you have heard nothing of him all these years?"

"Nothing until to-night. Oh! it does seem a desecration"—with an outbreak of pent feeling—

"that my first news of him should come through such a channel."

"What does it matter what the channel was so that the news which came through it was good?"

"It wasn't."

"What has happened to him? What has become of him? What has he done?"

"I do not know. That bounder was just going to tell me, when you burst in!"

An inarticulate sound of annoyance from Gwendolen was quickly followed by—

"Oh, why did not you both go on with the subject just the same? You could not have had a more interested listener!"

Lucia smiled grimly. "To such a student of the Human Document as you it is, of course, an interesting discovery that Love could ever have existed among pre-Adamite fauna; but to me, at even this distance of time, it seems scarcely a subject for light general conversation."

Her niece looked at Miss Granard, as if she saw her for the first time.

"I have never pitied you properly before," she said at last, in a voice that was almost low, and almost respectful for Gwen, "because until to-night I did not realize that you had ever known anything better; and I suppose," reflectively, "that even a lover who disappears at the first snub and never comes to the surface in fourteen years is better than

no life at all! I have been aware for some years that you were dead, but until now I had not grasped that you knew it."

But Lucia was walking resolutely to the door. "I shall be dead again to-morrow," she said in a metallic voice, "and you will oblige me very much by not digging me up."

CHAPTER VI

On the next morning came the dispersal usual after Mamma's *fête*. Usual, too, was the manœuvring among the three departing daughters to get the largest share of parental talk and sympathy to solace her on her homeward way. That Mamma was above all things and persons sympathetic was a creed for which any one of these three matrons would have gone to the stake.

Mrs. Baskerville won the first "look in," and after anxious, and from Mrs. Granard's aspect obviously needless, inquiries as to "what sort of night she had passed," tried to hark back to the yesterday-nipped-in-the-bud topic of her daughter Gwendolen's eccentricities. But here Mamma was firm.

"No, dear, I cannot let you go away with the taste of a topic that is so painful to you on your lips. If I felt less with you, I should be a better hearer for you. Of course, I should be deeply interested to hear more details; but I hope I am not *quite* so selfish as to let *that* be a reason for spoiling your journey, and I am so *sure* that, with a little patience, all will come right." There was no one who could

bear the misfortunes of others with a more heavenly resignation than Mrs. Granard, and the soft and sanguine gleam out of two bright blue eyes with which she accompanied her final "So, if you do not mind, we will talk of something else," cheered even while it disappointed her careworn and once more baffled daughter.

"At all events, I know the worst about *my* children," Anne said in resigned transition to a subject which was only second in interest to the tabooed one. "When they do anything ultra—I mean very unconventional—their first thought is to come and tell me and their father. Now, isn't it?"

"Quite true; and a very charming trait it is!"

"Whereas Sarah, poor thing, knows absolutely nothing about Zillah or Keturah. They are sealed books to her!"

The grandmother of the Jewish young ladies indicated made a judiciously inarticulate sound, which did not commit her to agreement, or offer any possibility of subsequent quotation; yet conveyed interest and acquiescence to the hearer. Nor did she block *this* topic. Her daughters' mild plaints of one another always gently titillated her sense of amusement.

"The extraordinary thing is that Sarah herself is not in the smallest degree aware of it; she thinks she is possessed of their entire confidence! Isn't it incredible?"

Again that wise wordless ejaculation. Mamma had no wish to arrest the flow of Anne's eloquence, the fact alluded to by her having often excited a detached wonder as a curious problem in psychology in Mrs. Granard's own mind.

"She is always praising her daughters' manners to her and Otto! I do not tell *her* so, poor soul; but it would kill me if my children treated me to that sort of hollow, frosty politeness."

Mamma smiled inwardly as a procession of the disrespectful epithets and uncomplimentary nicknames habitually applied to the self-congratulating lady beside her by her offspring passed before her mind's eye.

"No, indeed, you have nothing to complain of in that way!"

"And as to *confidences*, no one could look at Zillah's little *shut* face without seeing that her *one* anxiety is to keep her troubles—and I am sadly afraid she has some very serious ones—from her parents' knowledge."

"Dear little Zillah!"

"One would be so glad to help her if one knew how, but she is not very approachable, is she? There is only one person I know of from whom she would be certain to take in a nice spirit a word of advice."

Mrs. Granard did not ask who that *one* person was; but her prudent reticence did not avail her.

"If *you* were to give her the least hint of warning about her bridge and her racing and her undesirable Jew-men intimates, I am sure she would take it perfectly—in the best possible spirit."

An affectionate hand stole out to enforce, by a clasp of Mamma's, this expression of confidence in her parent's power to reform and save.

That parent returned the clasp, but could not be said to rise to the suggestion. She would have wished to receive it in silence, since, if truth must be told, Grandmamma would have much preferred to let her descendants, one and all, go to the deuce in their own way rather than incur the risk of their dislike by unpalatable advice or remonstrance. But she slipped out of the present tight place with the same easy grace with which she had escaped from many others. A charming smile, and a little air of matured wisdom did half the work.

"My dear child," she said, "when you are my age, you will have learnt that we old people must be very careful how we put our interfering old fingers into family pies. You know there is a proverb about the tree and the bark! Zillah has her parents, and I feel quite sure that whatever light clouds may be on her little horizon, they will soon roll by."

There could be no doubt that Mamma now wished the subject to be changed. So changed it accordingly was, though not without some regretful

back-lookings on the part of Anne to the opinions which she had meant to draw from Mamma upon the subject of girls putting themselves into men's power by allowing them to pay their bridge debts. However, she at once docilely started a new theme.

"How I shall be thinking of you to-day, having your first sitting!"

"I am sure you will."

"I do trust it will not over-tire you!"

"I do not think it will."

"You must remember" (playfully) "that though you look *fifteen*, you are not really *quite* so young as you were!"

Grandmamma's grateful smile was not an exact reproduction of her inward reflection that playfulness was not poor Anne's forte. Though a confirmed and professed invalid, Mrs. Granard was not fond of any suggestion that carried an implication of possible decay.

"I hope the picture will not turn out a horrid caricature."

"I hope not."

"Of course, we can't expect him or anybody else to do you real justice, but we should like to have something that we might show our grandchildren to give them some idea of you."

"How sweet of you!"

Once again the outward and visible sign did not tally with the inward feeling on Mrs. Granard's

part. When death came, she would probably meet it with decorous grace, as she had met every other event in life; yet the suggestion that the descendants alluded to would have to be contented with an image of her which she herself would not be present to correct, was the reverse of agreeable to her. She was glad when Anne's turn was over; and after many returnings from the door for last words, and again for *last* last words, for a patiently borne reiteration of caresses, and a well-endured foreboding of its being possibly the last birthday with which they might be blessed, Mrs. Baskerville had finally disappeared.

Sarah Church arrived next. "I have been watching the clock!" she said impatiently. "Poor Anne never has any sense of the value of time."

"She doesn't like saying Good-bye!"—with tender leniency.

"I do not think she is singular in *that*, and I should not have minded if my own time were not so limited; but Otto has ordered the car at twelve, and you know he can't bear any one to be late."

"It is one of the chief secrets of his success!"

A subdued yet discernible admiration coloured the comment; and Sarah felt how much more justice Mamma always did to Otto than did any one else. It was with that comfortable feeling of being completely understood—which, more than anything else, was what a conversation with Mamma always

engendered—that Sarah returned to her former theme.

Her parent knew that the angle at which she drew up her chair meant confidences. Mrs. Granard liked talking to Sarah better than to Anne. In the first place, she did not come so close to her, and Mamma disliked proximity; and she was more successful and less *larmoyante*. But—dear things!—one had to be wary as to what one said to any of them.

"I am sure I should be the last person to grudge poor Anne the chance of getting some of your invaluable hints; none of us need them so much as she does, and that is saying a good deal!"

"The way in which you all listen to a prosing old woman is wonderful!" It was said with a pretty thankfulness.

"The one person from whom those dreadful girls will take a word is *you!*"

"It is very sweet of them; but an old granny must go carefully. You know the proverb about the tree and the bark!"

This simile had done duty a quarter of an hour ago. At the moment it was uttered Mrs. Granard was regretfully conscious of the fact. Her priceless words were apt to be handed about among her daughters, and the sameness of the metaphor might disappoint them.

"They would take *anything* from you!"

"How dear of them! But that is all the greater reason why I should use the influence you attribute to me sparingly."

"Did you hear Gwendolen at dinner last night, trumpeting her 'profits' at the top of that brazen voice of hers, while the servants, you may be sure, were listening with that acute curiosity which they always bring to their masters' affairs? I declare that I was ready to sink under the table, and I do not know how Otto sat it out. It is the sort of thing that he particularly dislikes."

At this speech a twofold sense of gentle amusement crept over Mrs. Granard, evoked firstly by the delicacy of her son-in-law's social sense, and secondly by the growing tendency of Sarah to quote him. But she did not allow herself to smile.

"And her manner to her parents! The epithets she applies to them, 'Little One' to her father, and 'Old Ug'—I believe that 'Ug' is short for '*ugly*'—to her mother! It makes my blood literally boil!"

Mamma bent her head—in sorrow, as her daughter thought and was meant to think.

"I am afraid that Gwen's spirits do carry her away sadly sometimes!"

"If *my* children treated me like that, I should commit suicide!"

"Yes!"

The monosyllable was either interrogative or approving, as the hearer liked to take it.

"But, thank God, I have nothing to complain of on *that* head! Nothing can exceed the courtesy of my girls to *me!* Can there?"

"Nothing."

"And it is coupled with *perfect* confidence. I never could see that there is any antagonism between the two."

"None."

"Poor Anne seems to think that the way to secure your children's affection is to encourage them to slap you on the back, and call you abusive names."

Mamma here allowed herself a little laugh. "How amusingly you put it!"

"Of course, no up-to-date girl will stand the slightest word of remonstrance from an aunt. In fact, I personally should never think of offering it; but even Gwen and her sister would never dream of resenting anything that *you* said. If you could put before them in your wonderful way how ugly—setting aside all question of right and wrong—how *ugly*, how *un*funny, how ill-bred their behaviour to their parents is, you might do a world of good."

But though Mamma dissembled successfully how infinitesimal was her desire to confer the disagreeable benefits indicated upon her Baskerville granddaughters, yet Mrs. Church was driven from the coveted post by Jane Swinderby's impatience for

her innings, without having extracted anything that could be called an engagement from her parent to act in the direction suggested.

Mrs. Granard sometimes thought that she liked Jane the best of her daughters. Jane had no children in whose interests to make embarrassing requests to her, and Mrs. Swinderby had a streak of that dry humour in which her sisters were so conspicuously deficient.

"Sarah has been asking you to speak to the Baskerville girls?" was the first remark of the new occupant. "They are like a red rag to a bull to her; but really in her case, poor thing, one feels inclined to say, 'Physician, heal thyself.'"

"She is afraid that Gwen's spirits run away with her a little."

"*A little!*" raising her eyebrows till they almost met her thick iron-grey hair. "Poor Gwen! she is very often, almost always indeed, outrageously vulgar; but personally I do not mind her. She is all right *au fond;* and I have known her do uncommonly kind things, quite unostentatiously."

"She is a dear thing."

"Whereas the Churches—— Do you know what Bob says about the Churches?"

"Something racy, I am sure."

It is an integral part of Mrs. Granard's profoundly thought-out scheme of family life always to praise

her sons-in-law to their respective spouses, and to express or imply her own high opinion of their sense, spirit, and general desirability.

"You know how angry he is with me for not having children, and that he always takes it for granted that it is my fault?"

The speaker paused, as if for some expression of sympathy or wonder; but Mamma did not permit herself the luxury of the smallest smile. Might not that smile be quoted in the next conjugal wrangle between Jane and Bob on the delicate subject alluded to?

"Well, he has several times said to me, 'If you had given me daughters like those two little Hebrews'—I am sure I do not know why he should think that I should have had Jewesses if I had had anything!—'I should have cut your throat or my own!' I know which it would have been. Bob would never cut his own throat, would he?"

Here Mamma did laugh a little. "He is far too wise."

"Did you notice Zillah's face at dinner last night? She is evidently on the verge of some dreadful crisis. It is so astonishing that her parents do not suspect it."

But Mrs. Granard was not to be drawn. "Perhaps you are a little imaginative," she answered warily, scenting from afar a probable suggestion, prefaced by the usual flattering "They will stand

anything from *you!*" that her hand should probe Zillah Church's unknown wound.

But her perils were not quite ended yet.

"There's Bob's voice!" his wife said with a slight exasperation in her accent. "What a trial the fidgety traveller is! We almost always get to a station in time to catch the train before the one we mean to go by! I shall pretend not to hear! Bob is all smiles this morning at the prospect of returning to his beloved fens."

"It is a charming quality in a man to be so fond of his home."

"Oh yes, of course"—without enthusiasm—"but I do wish he could love it without being so grumpy when he is asked to leave it for twenty-four hours. Did you hear how he snapped at me last evening when I suggested that we should stay up another night, and go to see 'Puffles'?"

"It does not mean anything."

"Oh no, I know it does not; but everybody else does not know that. I do not mind how much he bites my nose off in private! I can bite his off quite as effectually, and rather enjoy it," laughing. "But I do not like it before people, before Otto Church especially. Could not you give him a hint to be civiller to me in public?"

Five minutes later, Mamma was alone, lying back a little tired by her diplomatic feats, but congratulating herself that she had not engaged herself

to give the hint—any of the various hints suggested; that she was free as air, and not "committed," like Lovelace's linnets; while each and all her daughters had left her with the sweet warm confidence that *theirs* was Mamma's point of view!

CHAPTER VII

THE Swinderbys had been gone half an hour—gone in a tempest of fuss ; Bob standing, watch in hand, at the cab-door, shouting "Jane!" to the admiration of the passers-by. Jane, perversely lagging, and the maid having to be dug out of the bowels of the house, where she was drinking beer at eleven o'clock in the morning, and giving parting kisses to the entire staff of servants, after her kind. The scolding and being scolded four-wheeler-full had, as was said, been gone half an hour, and was by this time walking the platform at King's Cross in perfect amity, buying and being bought papers, when Lucia entered the drawing-room, now emptied of all but its habitual recumbent deity. She came with as soft a foot as one approaching a shrine, and said with her pale smile—

"We must be getting ready. The enemy will be upon us in a quarter of an hour."

Mrs. Granard looked up with indolent pleasure at her daughter. Of course, it was very nice of those dear lately departed ones to make such a *fête* of her birthday. But it was rather a blessing to

have the house to one's self again too. Though she looked, she did not notice that Lucia's cheeks were even whiter than usual. Mamma would as little have thought of noticing variations in her child's complexion as she would of feeling apprehensive that the sofa was going to swoon, or the book-case to have a fit.

Lucia was never ill. That was another of the family traditions. Of course, if she had been, Mamma would have been as sweet and sympathetic as she was on every other occasion when sweetness and sympathy were called for. But two invalids in a house of the size of Mrs. Granard's was an impossibility. Lucia *could* not be ill; and so, to do her justice, she never was.

"I am afraid you are feeling rather flat after saying Good-bye to them all," she added presently to her former remark.

"*All!* Haven't I my Flower de Luce left?"

Had this delightful compliment been paid to Anne, she would have leapt upon her mother's hand and devoured it with kisses; but the person to whom it was addressed was not outwardly emotional; and she knew that her parent, like many other precious and fragile substances, was not to be touched more than could be helped. Yet at the hearing of the words a needle of remorse ran through her heart.

If the speaker of them, smiling up with such

absolute confidence into her eyes, could have known the thoughts, the hidden traitorous thoughts, that had held carnival and rout in her, Lucia's, mind, in the almost entirely white night she had just passed! If Mrs. Granard had known them, such knowledge must certainly have killed her! *Killed her!* In ironic comment upon the pious remorse of this thought came the ringing memory of Gwendolen's loud voice, "It would take a great deal to kill Granny!"

For a moment the tumble of chaotic night thoughts re-surging into her brain, made Lucia forgetful of where she was. There was no question of Granny being killed. That was a confusion of ideas. It was she herself who was dead—had been dead always: hadn't she been told so plainly last night? She had been alive for four days; that wasn't an excessive span, was it? And then she had died again, and been dead ever since. No, it was not Mamma who was dead. Mamma would never die! Then, with a horrified reaction against the current of such parricidal reflections, "God forbid that she should! God bless her! What would life be without her?"

She awoke with a start, to find a look of mild surprise on the beautiful face upon the old brocade cushion beneath her. Mrs. Granard was not used to having such an exquisitely turned *tendresse* as she had offered to Lucia received in churlish silence.

"I—I—am afraid I make a very poor substitute," Miss Granard replied lamely, stammering a little. Then, frightened by the unaffected and gently hurt surprise written on her mother's features, added quickly, "We must be getting ready. He complained of the light, or rather want of light, the other day. I should not be surprised if he insisted on the sofa being moved."

He did. If he had had his will, he would have turned the whole room topsy-turvy, would—oh, blasphemy!—have ejected Mamma from her sofa.

"*Must* you be lying down?" he asked with brutal bluntness. "I could manage the light much better if I could get you into that armchair near the window. Would it do you any harm to sit up in an armchair for an hour or a couple of hours a day?"

There was such frank incredulity as to the suggested injury in his face, that Lucia looked at her mother in indignant dismay. How much of this thing would Mamma be able to stand?

But to her petrification, Mamma was smiling. Her lifelong hypothesis, consistently acted upon, that nobody could mean to be rude to her, had resulted in her receiving so few incivilities, that perhaps when one came it had a tart piquancy. She was smiling; then shook her head—

"I am afraid it is quite impossible! When we know each other a little better"—the tone carried a

pleasant implication that such increased knowledge was likely and desirable—"you will realize *how* impossible!"

Mr. Hatton expressed neither regret nor sympathy, and with scant waiting for permission, and a curt request to Lucia to help him, began to push about the sofa to suit his requirements. He was a compactly built man, and though Mrs. Granard was not a particularly light weight, he manipulated her and her Chesterfield with dexterity and vigour, she smiling with that astounding urbanity all the time as at some amusing *trapèze* feat. Lucia, when released from her share of labour as curtly as she had been summoned to it, stood breathing somewhat hard, in part from the unusual effort, but more so from indignation—an indignation kept within bounds only by the unpleasant recollection that the performance to which this was the prologue was to be a gratis one!

At length—to Lucia it seemed a very long length—the artist seemed content with his completed arrangements. He had pushed and pulled Mamma about in a way which, though it made the blood sing in her daughter's ears, had in no degree disturbed Mrs. Granard's patient equanimity. It was not to be supposed that she enjoyed a treatment so diametrically opposed to that to which she was accustomed; but it was part of Mamma's life-tradition never to be disturbed at anything. The

classic Aphrodite or Nike, taken down from her pedestal to be enveloped in straw and laid in a packing-case still smiles, and at the end of her Odyssey about her own drawing-room, Mamma still smiled.

She was left at peace at last, the light falling on her face at exactly the angle thought desirable by Mr. Hatton—Mamma never shirked a meeting with full daylight—the blinds and curtains drawn and undrawn to taste. His easel set, and a painter's blouse donned, which, while it sensibly heightened the plebeian character of his appearance, yet made it evident that, as a navvy or a mechanic, he would have been a handsome specimen of his kind.

"Would you like me to stay or go?" Lucia asked her mother, bending over the latter's feet to replace the old brocade coverlet which shrouded them, and which had been almost shaken off in the course of Mrs. Granard's rude Odyssey.

The question was put almost *sotto voce*, and there could be no doubt as to the person to whom it was addressed; yet it was the one at whom it was *not* aimed who promptly answered it.

"Stay, of course! Talk to her! Keep her amused!"

Mr. Hatton's voice did not err on the side of lowness, and Lucia was not deaf; yet it seemed as though she heard him not.

"Which would suit you the best, that I should

stay or go?" she asked, in a soft tone of reverent tenderness, as if to give to this coarse intruder the right key in which to pitch any future remarks.

The intruder paused, chalk in hand, to look at her with unaffected surprise, and once again rushed in with even more resonancy of voice than before.

"Of course, you must stay. Tell her any little humorous thing you can think of! Keep her amused!"

Miss Granard's reply was to look with real alarm at her parent. How was she going to bear this repeated mention of herself before her sacred face as "*her*"? Mamma must certainly be on the edge of one of her Otto-Church attacks, and be turning faint. But—incredible as it seemed—Mamma was smiling.

"As to being amused," she said, supplying with sweet graciousness the answer her daughter had omitted to make, "I think we may depend upon *you* to keep me that!" Then turning to Lucia: "As to going or staying, dear child, do just as you feel inclined: go, if you are busy; stay, if you can spare time."

For once in her life the puzzled votary could not be quite sure which course she was intended to adopt, so sat uncertainly and rather crestfallenly down beside the sofa. She was to stay, not because Mamma wanted her, but because this bounder

ordered her to do so; and she was to be "funny" also at his bidding. Lucia was never "funny," and certainly on no occasion in all her life had she felt less inclined to be so than on the present one.

Was not the person who commanded impossible pleasantries from her the same who had brutally told her of the ruined soul and body of her one lover, ruined by her desertion of him? Was that lover quite, irretrievably damned? Was there no coming back for him from the hell to which *she* had consigned him? Oh if this repulsive stranger, who had forced open the gaol door of her long-prisoned heart, had told her either less or more! Oh if Gwen had but delayed her irruption for a quarter of an hour! She, Lucia, might have learnt some mollifying circumstance, some evidence that other causes besides her forsaking of him had helped in her boy-lover's submersion; might have learnt, perhaps, that that submersion was not final or hopeless, but only a temporary sinking in the slime. Repellant as was the channel through which alone information on this head could come to her, she felt that she must employ it. She must know before another night fell for how much or how little of her poor love's "going under" she was responsible.

She was so absorbed in the painful problem how best to attain this end, that she forgot how little it tended towards the production of humorous anecdotes—towards the keeping Mamma amused.

Yet it was by one of Mamma's softly infectious laughs that she was aroused.

"What a refreshing way of putting things Mr. Hatton has!" she was saying; "hasn't he, Lucia?"

But Lucia could only look stupidly blank.

CHAPTER VIII

Better aid towards the desired object was at hand. Two minutes later an immensely tall, smart girl walked in unannounced.

"I have broken your *consigne*, Granny," she said; "but I knew it did not apply to me. I have come to keep you going. We must have you look your best, mustn't we, Mr. —— ?"

She had clearly forgotten his name again, and had no shame in showing it. He did not supply it.

"Animation is everything, isn't it?" she said, bringing to bear upon him all the vivacity of her ugly yet piquant face, as if in illustration of her thesis.

He still kept silence, but the expression on his countenance hardly connoted acquiescence.

"Did you get our card?" she continued, as though unaware of his dumbness. "I posted it to you myself last night." Then, going up to her grandmother, though, in compliance with a law that had been immutable from infancy, not touching her, "You know, Granny, that I never let the grass

grow under my feet, so I have been trying to enlist Mr. ——"

"Hatton," supplied Lucia, in a low voice, and as unobtrusively as she habitually pursued rolling reels of cotton and retrieved strayed knitting-pins for her mother.

But though her long-trained voice was mild, she was conscious of an intense irritation. If her parent's drawing-room was to become a theatre for ill manners, let them at least be confined to the chief actor, who was so perfect a specimen of them.

Gwendolen nodded good-humoured thanks. "Hatton, ah! yes, of course. How stupid of me! I have tried to enlist Mr. Hatton as a client, though I was honest enough to break to him the fact that *you* would have nothing to say to us, but employed another firm."

Mrs. Granard's self-control was always perfect, nor on the present occasion did it fail her. Yet the subject chosen was a distasteful one to her. Neither her granddaughter's choice of a profession nor her manner of advertising it were at all to her mind, and the present introduction of the topic jarred on her fine taste. Moreover, the implication that the beauty of her hands was partly due to cultivation, and not entirely the work of nature, might, in her opinion, have well been spared. Yet she gave not the smallest sign of disapprobation; but only said with a little laugh of playful remonstrance—

"Off on your hobby, as usual! But we need not go into that now, need we? It would not amuse Mr. Hatton."

"I do not want it to amuse him!" retorted the girl, with a perverse determination in her clear, bold eye, not to dismount from the objectionable steed alluded to. "I want him to take it very seriously. Just think, Granny, Mr. Hatton had never heard of such a thing as a manicure till I enlightened him! Imagine what a field for *us!* You *did* get our card, didn't you?"

The appeal to him was so direct that Hatton had to answer. He did it as rudely as might have been expected.

"I am afraid that I put it into the fire. Such things are not in my line."

"So I should say!" returned she, coolly glancing with scientific interest at his hands. "But it is wonderful what we can do." This expression of hopeful augury fell unappreciated, but its utterer went bravely on. "I did quite a good stroke of business last night!" she said in complacent reminiscence. "You would not have thought, would you," turning, as if with an affable desire to enlighten deplored ignorance, to the painter, "that one would be likely to meet with clients for us among a party of medical students from Bart.'s? But one of them brought a friend with him, quite a swell in dress clothes; and we are to undertake *him* at once."

Grandmamma still smiled, though at what cost to her powers of simulation she alone knew. But Lucia's self-control gave way. She rose and drew near her niece, so as to be able to address her in a low voice, and escape the odious probability of being heard and answered by Hatton.

"You are talking too much ; it tires Mamma ! Had not you better go ? "

There was no *sotto-voce*-ness in Gwendolen's response. "Shall I go, Granny ? Lucia says I am tiring you. I thought that I was being very agreeable and illuminating ; but if I have made a mistake I will be off in a moment. I am already an hour overdue at the shop."

But to allow one of her descendants to leave her presence with the impression of having wearied her would have been to run counter to the drift of Mrs. Granard's whole life-scheme. How much better a little boredom, a few white lies, a little apparent countenancing of tiresome follies than to run the remotest chance of descending from her lifelong pedestal of universal sweet smiling sympathy !

"Tiring me, dear child ! " she said with the lifted eyebrows of unfeigned surprise. "I was just thinking how amusing you were. Between you and Mr. Hatton there is not much danger of my being bored. I wonder could we persuade him "—with a look of deprecating appeal to the artist—"to repeat a most racy anecdote that he has just been telling

me about a friend of his at Buluwayo? It seems a shame to give you the trouble of repeating it; but I am afraid I should mar it in the telling."

Thus subtly did Grandmamma, without hurting any one's feelings, escape for the time from the tyranny of the manicure! Gwendolen listened to the story and laughed at it, as she was always ready to laugh at anything. And Mrs. Granard laughed again, perhaps to cover the fact that Lucia did not laugh at all. Upon her mirthless face her niece's eye lighted with that expression of interested compassion which it had worn since the revelations of last night.

"It is Lucia that is tiring you, isn't it, Granny? —not I? Shall we send her away?" the girl cried.

The form of dismissal was rude, but its object knew that it was kindly meant, and she went thankfully. For an hour she would be free—free to retire to her Black Hole—by no other name was her bower ever known among her young relations—free to scheme her best to bring about a private interview with the only person who could tell her the extent of her guilt towards Carruthers; free to brace herself for the painful nausea of that meeting.

Why not waylay him to-day at his exit? Even if the servants were present, it would be easy to frame some pretext in connection with details about

future sittings for drawing him into her sitting-room. The offensive interest in his eyes had given her a repelled sub-consciousness that he would not need much drawing. It would be impossible to face another night with only such imperfect knowledge as was now possessed by her. Better know the worst. And what could and would the worst be? Not that he was dead? Hatton had evidently no such knowledge. That he was a hopeless drunkard? gambler? morphomaniac? steeped in low sensuality, with all nice sense of honour in respect to money lost? degraded to a lower plane?

Each harrowing suggestion took her a step further down the stairs, and the last one landed her at her door. She drew a long breath, in expectation of an hour's luxurious indulgence in solitary wretchedness. But even this gay form of pastime was not to be allowed her. The opened door disclosed a figure already in possession of the bower, a woeful figure, too, despite the *chic* faultlessness of its walking-dress—Zillah Church!

"I thought you were never coming!" The cry was feverish in its impatience, and its utterer was so preoccupied as not to see the look of blank disappointment on her aunt's face; the aunt whose one promised treat of an hour in which to gloat over her own misery was thus reft from her. The look—such is the worth of a long habit of self-suppression—was gone in a moment, and replaced

by that one of anxious kindliness which the sight of Zillah's little unhappy Jewishly pretty face had of late always called forth.

"Mamma is having her first sitting."

"Oh, then, you will have to go back to her at once?"

"No, I shall not! Gwen is with her, and Mr. Hatton is making her laugh"—a slight but not outwardly perceptible bitterness tinged this last clause—"so it is all right."

"I thought you were never coming!"

"Have you been here long?"

"Yes—I do not know—about ten years!"

"Is it anything fresh?"

"Yes."

"Anything worse than usual?"

"Yes." Lucia heaved a patient sigh. In the case of Zillah, history abused its privilege of repeating itself. "How much?"

"A hundred and twenty! I went on from here last night to the Camberwells'."

Miss Granard sat down by her knee-hole writing-table, covered with notes, letters, and papers referring to other people's affairs—it exhausted Mamma to write business letters—and leaning her elbow on the leather top, fixed her eye in dejected rumination on the floor.

There could be but the one way out of the *impasse* for Zillah *this* time! To reproach her

niece never occurred to the aunt; but pity welled up strong, as the image of Baron Silbermein in oily amativeness rose before her mind's eye. Life was ugly; either other people made it so for you, or, failing that, you made it so for yourself! Poor little Zillah!

"You could not squeeze twenty pounds for me out of the housekeeping money, I suppose?"

The suggestion was made not quite without difficulty, yet as if the edge of it had been worn off by previous use.

"Quite impossible. And if I could, where is the hundred pounds to come from?"

The answer to this question was a second suggestion, which was more difficult of production than the other, yet came all the same, carried by a trembling low voice, and enforced by the desperation of two velvet eyes.

"Could you—would it be possible for you to advance me any of your own money?"

There was a certain amount of shame in the voice, though a very much less quantity than of the anxiety which enveloped and almost drowned it. A reduction to such straits as poor Miss Church's makes the necessity for mean actions a second nature.

"I am considerably overdrawn already."

To the present auditor it was needless to explain how this position of financial unsoundness had come about.

"Then there is nothing for it! I shall have to do it this time! I owe him five hundred pounds already! No one ever held such cards as I!"

The level tragedy of the girl's tone broke at the end into a bitter upbraiding of Fate.

Once again Miss Granard missed an opportunity. She altogether omitted to point out that no absolute necessity lay upon a young woman to devote her whole life—wasting her summer mornings and ravaging her nights—to playing bridge for stakes which she could not possibly afford! If Lucia had not learnt Mamma's lesson *never* to say disagreeable things, she at all events knew when to abstain.

"Have you nothing you could sell? No jewel? no trinket? Your father gives you so many handsome ornaments."

"I dare not! He would be sure to ask to see it. He is so suspicious. If we do not wear any of our things for a little while, he always inquires what has become of them? I believe he thinks we have pawned them!"

A wonder, unworthy of the seriousness of the occasion, crossed Lucia's mind as to whether her interlocutor was aware of the hereditary reason possessed by her parent for thinking of the special branch of commerce alluded to.

A stupefied silence followed, broken by Miss Granard.

"There is my diamond star. I suppose I could

raise some money on that ; but it could not be done in a minute. I must have time."

Zillah shook her head. She was far past gratitude. "That would be no use ; I must have it to-day ! Well "—beginning to pull up the scarf round her slight shoulders, as if in preparation for departure—"there is nothing for it ! I shall have to do it ! It is just my luck ! "

The sombre despair in words and tone contrasted so harshly with the apparently graceful prosperity of their utterer, that once again Lucia's sad heart went out in a bitterness of impotent pity towards her niece.

"And—*Jack ?* " she said in a low voice.

It would have seemed impossible for Zillah's little features to look more disconsolate than they had done a moment earlier, yet at that question a new and desperate contraction pinched them.

"*Jack !* " she repeated.

"Yes ; does he know ? "

"Not about last night ; about all the rest he does."

"And you have told him what you are going to do ? "

"Yes."

"How did he take it ? "

"Oh, of course, he was very much annoyed ; but he was quite sensible about it. He thinks that perhaps we shall be able to see each other more comfortably after I am married."

It was said matter-of-factly, and with no apparent consciousness of anything open to objection in the plan. But Lucia, case-hardened to a certain degree though she was, let her face fall in her hands, as she sat by her knee-hole table. A sea of degradation seemed rolling over her and hers. Life *was* ugly!

CHAPTER IX

By-and-by, without lifting her head, Lucia knew that Zillah had gone—gone with a little set, desperate face, to meet the destiny which even the offer of her aunt's diamond star was powerless to avert. Lucia was at liberty to devote what remained of her hour of freedom to the deferred pleasure of bathing in the sea of her own woes.

The sense of it came back to her almost at once; but it was no longer simple, but complicated with and involved in the realization of Zillah's deeper ruin.

How many ways there were of being unhappy! How many different ways of loving! With a sort of forlorn pride she looked back upon the uncalculating primitive passion with which her own lover had pressed his entire pennilessness upon her acceptance; not doubting that, since he proffered it in conjunction with boundless hopes and utter love, he was offering her the best thing life had to give. She contrasted it with the love of Zillah's "Jack," to whom, though a good deal "annoyed" at the idea of seeing her in another man's possession, it had

clearly never occurred to offer the alternative of a union with himself and with the very modified form of poverty which they would have to face. Clearly it had never occurred to Zillah either that he should do so.

From that point Miss Granard's imagination started, and drew for her a picture of what her own life would have been—small hardships and great love, scanty comforts and deep peace, health, comradeship, the close clasp of wedded hands forced apart by no degrading bridge-debts, tailors' bills, and milliners' extortions.

Half unconsciously she was setting a few children's rosy faces round her frugal board, when a knock at her door overset table, children, and all. No one ever knocked at Lucia's door. It was always held free to all comers who had any "tediousness" to bestow upon her; of which, indeed, none of her *habitués* were stingy. Who could be the present over-scrupulous applicant for her company? The answer was prompt, since the knocker, having satisfied civility with his knuckles, did not wait for the permission he took for granted.

It was Hatton. "I thought you would like to hear how the sitting went off?"

"Thank you."

"It is going to be all right; not an artistic *chef d'œuvre*, of course. As I told you, I make no

pretence to be a professional; but I *have* a knack of hitting off a likeness, and it *will* be the old lady, which is, after all, what matters, isn't it?"

"Might I ask you—would you mind—not speaking always of my mother as 'the old lady'?"

He looked genuinely surprised, but neither offended nor hurt.

"I meant no offence. I always used to call my own mother 'the old lady.' What would you like me to call her?"

"Mrs. Granard."

"All right, Mrs. Granard! Well, it will be Mrs. Granard, and no mistake!"

"I am very glad!"

The exhilaration in her tone, if it existed, was latent. She was wishing earnestly, as she spoke, that it lay with her to tell him how impossible it was for her and her family to lie under such a pecuniary obligation to him. But, alas! she was powerless in the matter. They all seemed to take it as a matter of course; and Zillah Church knew why it was out of the question for her, Lucia, to defray the expense out of her own not excessive resources. His face was beaming with good-humoured self-satisfaction as his voice broke in upon the mortification of her thoughts.

"I always was a good hand at catching a likeness. Before I took up this sort of thing I could always hit off any one that took my fancy with a

bit of paper and a pen and ink. I have got one or two scribbles of the kind that *you* might care to see."

She disdainfully thought this improbable, on first hearing the suggestion; then a something in his manner made her suddenly hot and pink. Of whom were those scribbles that might interest her the intended portraits?

But he was saying something on another topic. She must bring her strayed attraction back.

"I think if you do not mind, that *you* had better stay through the sitting to-morrow. The other lady—your niece—or oughtn't I to call her your niece?—only I do not know her name—well, she is too much for the old—for Mrs. Granard."

"Very well: I will stay." Her stiff acquiescence should have closed the interview; but Hatton had apparently something more to say.

"I had another reason for wishing to speak to you this morning."

"Yes?"

"We were interrupted yesterday."

"Were we?" The opportunity she had wished for, had planned to achieve, was come; yet, now that it had done so, she felt powerless to avail herself of it. She seemed made of wood.

Her cold, repellent air gave even him a touch of diffidence.

"I thought you might like to hear a little more about the poor chap we were talking of, and in whom you seemed a bit interested?" He thought her silence meant offence. "Of course, if I was mistaken, there is no need to say——" he went on, and looked doorwards.

That gave her voice. Through whatever channel it came, she must learn what there was to be learnt, even if the admission of its being important to her to hear it, necessarily put her in the power of this coarse being's pleasantries or jibes.

"I do wish to hear," she said distinctly; "I am interested."

"I am afraid that my news is not very new. It must be ten years since I last set eyes on Carruthers."

"*Ten* years!" The disappointment in her voice was patent.

"But I have heard of him now and again since —here, there, and everywhere."

"Yes?"

"Once a pal of mine met him at Sydney; he was a waiter at a hotel there!" Then in answer to the falling of her face, "But you must not think the worse of him for that: people out there do not look down upon a chap, no matter how he earns his bread, as they do here!"

A waiter at a hotel! The man to whom she had given her only kisses!

"After that I believe he got into rather low water for a time—could not get a job of any kind—went very near being starved. When I heard of it, I did what I could for him. I was not very flush myself then; but I managed to find him out—it was not easy—and make a fiver reach him! Poor chap! he *was* grateful!"

Her head sank lower on her chest. A waiter at Sydney! That now seemed to her a dizzy height in comparison of this last revelation! That her lover should have been saved from starvation by the trumpeted bounty of *this* informant! Against her will she raised her shamed eyes to his face, whose undoubted good looks were at the moment heightened by the glow of good-natured satisfaction which the sense of past virtues and present diffusion of pleasure lent them.

"Was that quite the last you heard of him?"

"No. After that he must have got up a bit in the world; he was in a dry goods store at San Francisco. But that must have been four or five years ago."

"And was *that* the last?"

"Well, no—yes—no—not quite. There did come a rumour—but it was only a rumour, and I am sure I forget how it came—that he—but I dare say it was not true."

He paused, less as if searching his memory for a

fact that was slipping from it, than as if uncertain whether the fact or rumour in question was suitable for presentation to his present hearer.

"What was it?"

"Well—but I did not give much credit to it—the chap that told me had heard it from another fellow, who had heard it from some one else again—that he——"

The door flew open.

"Granny wants you!"

It was the same interrupter who had broken in on the previous day. But how infinitely worse this infraction seemed than the former one! How intolerable the formula usually acquiesced in with such cheerful haste, "*Granny wants you!*"

For how many years had these three small words formed the master-key to Lucia's life! But oh! cruel Granny, to want her just now of all nows! —when the fiat that, fourteen years ago, had driven away her lover to destruction now robbed her of the wretched solace of learning the lowest depths of all the many depths to which he had clearly sunk! Yet she went.

"I am very sorry!" Gwen said as Lucia was leaving the room; and glanced from one to the other with a look in which there was less of her usual jocosity than of compassion and curiosity. "But we all know what Granny is! At least, of course, Mr. Hatton does not know! Granny, Mr. Hatton, is our God;

and my aunt Lucia is the burnt offering we offer daily upon her altar!"

He looked back at the giver of this piece of information with less of interest than disappointment and disapproval.

"You seem to me to express yourself very strongly!" he said bluntly.

"I am often thought rather *racy!*" she answered laughing, yet with a patent self-satisfaction, in which he might have recognized a kinship to himself.

Then she sat down. "Need you go this very minute?" she asked, seeing him take up his hat. "If you could spare time, I should like to have a few words with you."

He put his hands, hat, and all resolutely behind his back.

"It is no use! You would only be wasting your time. It is quite out of my line!"

She looked surprised for a moment at the dogged resolution of his refusal, then, understanding, laughed.

"Oh, you are afraid that I am going to 'tout' again; but no! I have given you up as a hopeless case! All the same," with a commercial after-thought, "if you *did* happen in your wanderings to come across any one who was on the look-out for something of the kind——"

Hatton laughed grimly. "In the sort of places

that *my* wanderings take me to, people do not think much about the colour of their hands."

"I should like to hear about your wanderings," she said, looking at him with an indulgent curiosity that ignored his surliness. "I always think it interesting to hear all about other people's lives; and the more unlike my own they are, and the less they want to tell me about them, the more I want to hear."

"I dare say that people would think mine rather interesting," he answered with a touch of his usual self-complacency. "But I do not often talk about it."

"No? That is a pity if it is interesting, and rather selfish too. Now, I am always delighted to tell anybody who cares to hear anything about myself." She said it with her broad, direct smile, that promised candour at all events in the narration, and some might have felt disposed to accept her invitation; but of that number Hatton apparently was not. "But it is not about either you or me that I came to talk to-day. I want to speak to you on quite another subject."

"Indeed?"

His tone expressed a dry wonder as to what topic of common interest there could be between himself and this unwelcome meteor which had shot across his sky.

"I want to ask you a question."

"A question?"

There was a ludicrous increase of distrust in his

face. But for once she was too much in earnest to be amused.

"Yes, several questions."

"I will not promise to answer them till I hear what they are."

"Of course not. You once knew a man of the name of *Carruthers?*"

He hesitated perceptibly. "Knocking about the world as I have done, I have known a great number of men."

"And among them you *did* know a man of the name of Carruthers?"

She had driven him into a corner, and from that corner his blue eyes darted wrathful sparks at her.

"Yes, I did—a long while ago."

"Then why could not you say so at once?" retorted she with a transient petulance, which was gone in a moment, and gave place to an eager seriousness of interest. "And if so, can you find him? Can you lay your hand upon him?"

CHAPTER X

He stared at her in undisguised stupefaction. Was her mind as insane as her appearance?

"*Find Carruthers! Lay my hand upon Carruthers!* Why in Heaven's name should I?"

She did not answer immediately, but only looked at him contemplatively.

"If I did find him, what on earth should I do with him?" he repeated in a crescendo of angry wonder.

"It is odd, isn't it," she asked, "that *you* should have known all about him, while I had never heard the name of Carruthers till last night?"

"I do not know from whom you heard it last night?"

His tone was so frankly suspicious that she laughed.

"I had not my ear to the key-hole, as you seem to imply. I heard it from my aunt."

"From your aunt?"

"Yes. I made her tell me. I could not understand what she could have to talk about so intimately as you were evidently talking when I interrupted you, to——" She stopped.

"To a rough chap like me? Pray do not be afraid of hurting my feelings. I quite understand."

"On the contrary, you quite *mis*understand! I hesitated because I was going to say, 'to a perfect stranger like you;' and I stopped myself because I remembered that we are none of us really strangers to each other. We are all the same flesh and blood!" Her smile grew more generously genial as she aired this last magnanimous platitude.

He left it uncommented on.

"I do not know whether you have discovered that my aunt is a very reserved person? I was so astonished at finding her talking with such evident intimacy to any one, that I never rested till I made her tell me what it was about? I am afraid I am like that!"

"Well, I am not!" he answered discouragingly. "I have no wish to hear anything that a chap would rather not tell me. And, what is more, I do not remember the time when anybody got out of *me* anything I did not want to tell him!"

"How curious!" she said, leaning her long arms on Lucia's writing-table, and looking at him across it with unaffected interest. "How unlike me! But these sort of inherent differences between different natures are what make life so amusing!"

"Do you think so?"

"In this case I really am not trying to get

anything out of you—I mean in the way of information. It only occurred to me to apply to you for a little help. Do not you think we ought all to be ready to give 'first aid' when we see a fellow-creature drowning?"

She made her appeal—platitude as it was—with such real sincerity, and such a sweet-tempered overlooking of his rebuffs, that the churlishness of his expression relaxed somewhat, though his answer was still a defensive one.

"I will not make any admissions in the dark."

There was a minute's pause, then Gwendolen spoke.

"What would you do, if for fourteen years of your life you had been living alongside of a tragedy without being aware of it?"

"I do not know what you are talking about."

"Accident has made you, a perfect stranger, acquainted with what I, her own niece, never had the faintest suspicion of! When I think"—throwing up her odd green eyes to the ceiling—"how we have all made her a beast of burden; and, what is more, complacently determined that she *liked* it! *How* she must have suffered!"

There was another pause. When Hatton broke it, there was a new roughness in his voice.

"Do you think you have any right to tell me your family secrets? Remember that you never saw me till to-day!"

The girl took no notice of the protest. "Fourteen years ago," she went on, descending from the ejaculatory to the narrative, "Lucia and this Mr. Carruthers made up their minds to marry each other! At that date, you know"—with a lapse into twentieth-century flippancy—"if people had an attraction towards each other, they always felt it necessary to rush into matrimony."

"I suppose they have found some better substitute now?"

"They became engaged, poor creatures!"

Whether the real compassion in the narrator's voice was provoked by the rococo folly of the condition indicated, or by its enforced cessation, was not clear to the hearer; nor did he value his interlocutor's opinions enough to make any effort to solve the doubt. But his whole air told her that he *did* care to learn the *dénouement* of her story.

"Well?"

"As far as I can make out, it lasted *four days!* That was not a very large modicum of happiness to stock you for your whole life, was it?"

"Well?"

"And then——"

"Yes, then?"

"Then Granny took to her bed and threatened to die—at least, that is what I gathered; for poor Lucia—my poor aunt was too loyal to put it that way."

"Yes?"

"And then the rest of the family came 'flying all abroad,' posting from every corner of the globe to stop it."

"Yes?"

"And, of course, they succeeded. Lucia was only seventeen; she is thirty-one now: do you think she looks more or less? To me she has always seemed one of those people who are of no particular age. The young man went off in a rage, and Lucia remained behind, and carried cushions and wrote notes, and went out of the drawing-room when anybody amusing called, and stayed in when any bores arrived, for fourteen years; and we all thought she liked it! None of us younger ones had ever been told a syllable about her poor little romance. And I give you my word of honour, until last night I thought—we all thought that she liked it!!!"

Her green eyes explored his sombre blue ones for some expression of acquiescent sympathy such as was not furnished by his tongue. They were puzzled by what they found there.

"Why have you told me all this?"

"Cannot you guess?"

"I had rather not try."

"I told you," she said, with extreme impressiveness, "because we are both human." He stared back at her stupidly, the idea of her lunacy again crossing his mind. "And that being so, I thought

that you would help me to redress a great wrong. I am rather fond of redressing wrongs when I come across them, aren't you ?"

She had broken again into her broad smile of self-satisfaction, displaced for a longer time than usual by the earnestness of her appeal.

"Are you quite sure that you do not sometimes make them wronger ?" he asked distrustfully.

"Of course, we can't give my poor aunt back those fourteen wasted years. But she is not so very old yet ! She has still capabilities for happiness."

"I should suppose so."

"And I imagine that she still keeps her curious nineteenth-century ideal of bliss—starvation *à deux !*"

At this relapse into cheap cynicism, Hatton's features, which had been slightly unbending from their hostile gravity, contracted again into a frown.

"I suppose that you have some project in your head, but I fail to see how *I* can come into it !"

"Wait a bit !" she cried, perfectly undiscouraged ; "and do not look towards the door. I am sure, when I have unfolded my plan, you will be only too glad to co-operate in it." In her excitement she had risen to her full height, and now towered above his paltry five foot ten. Her slitty eyes, opened so wide as almost to look large, flashing into his. "Why shouldn't *we*—you and I—combine to give her back the happiness that she was fraudulently robbed of fourteen years ago ?"

He still thought her mad, and yet felt angrily that there was something slightly infectious in her excitement.

"It was the aunts that did it," she continued, persisting in thrusting her confidence upon her unwilling listener. "Granny, bless her! never said a disagreeable word to any one in her life, though I am sometimes afraid that the old darling is about as selfish as she can hold together."

"Do you think that it serves any purpose to tell me these damaging things about your nearest relations?"

"Of course it does. It is my way of trying to enlist your sympathy."

"You have not yet told me how you propose to employ me."

The words were stiff; yet there was, or she fancied it, a slightly less discouraging accent in his voice.

"Well," she said, sitting down again, and drawing her chair nearer to him with an air of the frankest comradeship, "it is like this. You know Mr. Carruthers?"

"I have not seen him for ten years."

"But you know people—men who know him?"

"For aught I know to the contrary, they may be all dead by now."

She laughed. "Why suppose such an unlikely

universal mortality among the poor man's acquaintance?"

"Those that live lives such as Carruthers and chaps like him live, are never very unlikely to go under," he returned drily.

"Were they such dreadful lives?" she asked with rapt curiosity.

"I never said anything about 'dreadful,'" retorted he, shrinking up again into reticence. "I only meant that out there men are not very apt to make old bones."

At that her gaiety faded for a moment. "If he had died, would you have heard of it?"

"I might, and I mightn't."

"Is there any way of ascertaining?"

"Ascertaining what?"

"Whether he is still alive; and if so, what he is doing; what sort of life he is leading; what has become of him, in short."

He was silent.

"Is it quite impossible?"

"I do not say that," he answered slowly, then added, with an access of that self-complacency which had so irritated Lucia, "There are very few parts of the globe where I have not got chaps in communication with me."

His self-conceit must have *froissed* even Gwen's robust good humour, for she said petulantly—

"Why do you talk of everybody as 'chaps'?"

"Why do you ask so many questions?" returned he, rudely.

She laughed, which was always her way of receiving unpleasant speeches.

"Because I want them answered. I am going to ask another now. What was the last, the very last, you heard of him—of Mr. Carruthers?"

Whether to prove his dislike of being catechized, or for some other reason, the response tarried long. It was not direct when it came.

"I was just turning over in my mind whether I would tell your aunt, when you came in and interrupted us."

"If you tell me, it will be just the same thing. I will pass it on to her."

"I am not at all sure that I shall give you the chance."

"Why?"

"It would not be very pleasant hearing for her."

"Was it something so very bad—so very objectionable?"

Hatton looked grudgingly at the eagerly interrogative face opposite—rather closely (in its fever of inquiry) opposite him—with an expression which seemed to say how much he would enjoy baulking her curiosity. But apparently he conquered the impulse.

"What last I heard of Carruthers—it was only a rumour, it is true, and did not come by any means at first-hand — but what last I heard of

Carruthers—that must be about three years ago—was that he was locked up."

"Mad?"

"No, in prison, for knocking a man on the head in a gambling-hell at Pretoria."

Even Miss Baskerville's incurably smiling face clouded at this rosy picture of the habitat of her aunt's lover, but presently cleared.

"You say it was only a rumour? One knows how much to believe of *them!*"

"It was a rumour that came from several quarters at once."

"Did he gamble?"

"Ye—es, poor chap! He did most things that he ought not to do. But he was not a bad sort of boy when he first came out. Anyway, he had been quite knocked out of time."

Gwendolen drew a long, wondering breath. She was not apt to take much time over anything, but it required a minute or two even for her to fit the family drudge and buffer into her new frame, that of a charmer whose fatal fascinations drove young men to perdition.

"I did what I could for him; that is always my way. But he was one of those ch—fellows that you could not do anything for. He said he had nothing to live for!"

"*What* an ass!"

"And now"—taking up his hat resolutely—"I

must be going, please. I have some one waiting for me at home—at my lodgings. So, as I don't think you can want me for anything more——"

"But I *do!* I want you to find Mr. Carruthers."

"Still?"

"Yes, still! I do not believe a word of that ugly story about the gambling-hell. Find out whether he is alive. However low he has fallen, I am sure that he might be redeemed. There is hardly anybody who may not be redeemed, is there? You are such a cosmopolitan. I fancy that there is scarcely a spot in the habitable globe where you are not more or less at home. You *can* find out, if you try. *Do* try! Bring him back to her!"

CHAPTER XI

"*Granny wants you!*" With the old packhorse step that had carried her so many million times up those prosaic London stairs, Lucia had obeyed the summons usually acquiesced in with such gentle alacrity. Habit, indeed, ensured that the alacrity, long since grown mechanical, was there; but there was no gentleness in the young woman's heart. Rather, bitter revolt.

Oh, why could not Granny have done without her for five minutes more? Even three would have sufficed to tell her to what lower depth than that to which his broken heart had driven her once high-souled boy-lover, he had since fallen. Lower than a waiter at a hotel in Sydney? That would be easy. Lower than the beggared recipient of the paltry, yet trumpeted bounty of a Hatton! Was that possible? She must carry the doubt with her through another century-long night. What likelihood even then of her ever having an opportunity of solving it? By what impossible wrenching herself out of her life-groove could she secure the certainty of an undisturbed half-hour's intercourse with the only person capable of telling her the truth?

At the drawing-room door she paused, and passed her hand over her face, as if conscious of being such a changed Lucia that her very features might have altered their position, and frighten Granny by some extravagant metamorphosis. But they were all in their accustomed places, and it was a not much changed Lucia that stood beside the sofa, which had been restored to its usual position, and said in a key of more than usual sympathy—more than usual, because of a hidden alarm that it might be detected to be less—

"Well, dear, are you alive after it?" If her vision had not been turned inward, she would have spared the needless question.

"Alive!" repeated Mrs. Granard, in a key of almost reproachful—only that she never was reproachful—astonishment. "I feel as if I had been for a drive on the Sussex Downs. Mr. Hatton's talk is an extraordinary tonic."

Lucia's pale lips fell apart. "I should have thought that he had a six Otto-Church power of boredom."

Granny's cheeks grew faintly pink at this crude indictment of her taste.

"You must stay in the room to-morrow," she answered graciously, as if promising a treat. "You have not had a fair opportunity of judging him. I do not know when I have spent such an amusing morning."

Poor Miss Granard's tact was, unlike her mother's, not always faultless, and she now struck a wrong note.

"I am sure that you must have supplied the amusingness. It could not have been from him."

Granny never asseverated or contradicted, or upheld her own opinion in the teeth of any one else's. So, still a little pink, she slightly changed the subject.

"He tried to keep Gwen in order. She really was very naughty." The blame was of the mildest, yet was instantly wiped out by praise. "She was intensely amusing, as she always is; but she made me laugh so much that we have decided"—"we!"—"that we will not admit her to-morrow. If it does not bore you too much, will you stay to-morrow? You slipped out of the room like a shadow before I had missed you."

"I thought I should be *de trop*. I will stay, of course. I am never riotously amusing, am I?"

Something unusual in tone and words brought a slight shade of surprise across the sunshine of Mamma's face.

"You are my Flower de Luce," she answered prettily, but, as she herself felt, a little baldly. Neither she nor her Flower de Luce were sorry when their *tête-à-tête* was broken by the irruption of Gwendolen.

"Well, Granny, how do you like him? Isn't he rippin'?"

With the sense of an acquiescent hearer, Granny let herself go, and expressed what was her real opinion.

"He is *impayable*."

At the entrance of her niece, Lucia had snatched a look at her, in the mad idea that she might read on her countenance the end of that sentence of which the girl's intrusion half an hour ago had robbed her. She could read nothing, since nothing was there but the usual insensate *joie de vivre*.

"Don't you envy me? I am going to the Zoo with him this afternoon." Miss Baskerville had dropped her unending length on a stool beside her grandmother's sofa, and was evidently—but that she always was—prepared to be communicative.

"*You?*"

"Yes, I—with him and his little boy."

"I did not know that he was married."

"I dare say he is not." This impudent sentence was uttered with so evident an intention to shock, that neither of the hearers consented to be drawn.

"Did he ask you to go with him?"

"Oh dear no! He tried his best to prevent me."

"Then why, dear, are you going?"

"Because he interests me. He is so rude, and

wears such outlandish clothes, and says such impossible things. And as to the little boy, I am dying to see what he is like. He must be such a strange production. And, besides, I am sorry for the poor little wretch, shut up in lodgings all day by himself."

"How did you find out that fact, you very remarkable person?" Mrs. Granard asked with a smile that might pass for one of admiration.

"Mr. Hatton—if I speak truth, I think it was only in order to get away—told me that he must go home because he had some one waiting for him at his lodgings. Of course, I had to ask who it was."

"Was not that a little rash?"

"Of course, it might have been a 'lady friend,' as he himself would express it. But it was not; it was only a little boy. Poor little devil! he has never been to the Zoo in his life."

"And you are going to escort him there?"

"Yes; his father and I. I would not miss it for the world!"

Mrs. Granard was still smiling. There was no just cause for doubt that she thought her granddaughter's plan as ill-judged and objectionable as Lucia did; but it would not have been Granny if she had said so. All she did say was—

"How fond you are of children!" and "I hope it will not rain!"

Gwendolen replied that she should go whether it did or not, and, promising to take her aquascutum, departed triumphant.

Lucia had listened silently, her disgusted indignation at Miss Baskerville's brazen pursuit of an unwilling bounder deadened by a gnawing hunger to learn whether Gwen, with her extraordinary power of extracting things from reluctant persons, had learnt the fact that must have been embodied in that unfinished sentence whose beginning never ceased ringing in her own ears. It was more because she knew that it would be what was expected from the every-day Lucia than that she felt any desire to say it, that she remarked, after her niece's exit—

"I wish that if Gwen *must* throw herself at some one's head, she would choose a gentleman!"

Mamma gave one of her tiny shrugs. "With all her flightiness, one can trust her not to go *too* far; and though Mr. Hatton is rather a rough diamond, there is something very wholesome and breezy about him!"

"Breezy!" Yes, that was it! That was what Hatton came to be labelled as in the Granard household; that was what each married daughter, when he was presented to her, catching up Mamma's happy adjective, pronounced him.

Otto Church liked him because the family were getting a portrait out of him gratis. Bob Swinderby, because, upon inquiry—and indeed, the stranger was

never loth to trumpet his achievements in any line —it transpired that he had shot and stuck almost extinct deer and strange pigs in out-of-the-way regions. The charming Baskerville, because he liked all men, and loved most women.

From the second sitting of Mrs. Granard her granddaughter Gwen was excluded, but in so flattering a manner that a person much more thin-skinned than she could not have been offended at it. Lucia, as bidden, took her place.

For the two hours of the sitting she went through the purgatory of tantalization of being in the near presence of the one person who could restore her to sleep at night, and comparative peace —the dull peace to which she was used—by day. He *could* do this if only—if only the impossible happened, and Mamma were to leave the room for ten minutes, five minutes, even three! But Mamma never left any room in which she had once been picturesquely deposited, without the inevitable daily ceremonial which at stated hours attended her transfer.

It was possible that her own present excess of misery was wasted emotion. It was possible that the broken sentence-end was to tell her that her poor boy's luck had taken a turn, and he was going up again in Fortune's scale—up, even if ever so little. If this were the case, why had the speaker so palpably hesitated?

This dreary question was ironically answered by one of Mrs. Granard's soft yet hearty laughs; evidently at some specimen of Hatton's humour which her self-absorption had made her miss. She ought to laugh too. Through her large white eyelids—in her inner consciousness it had sometimes struck her that her eyelids were rather beautiful—she felt that Hatton was looking at her, either in sympathy or surprise. It made her angry to think that it was the former, and she looked up, vaguely planning speech. But Mrs. Granard had no need of her aid.

"I hope your little boy enjoyed the Zoo yesterday," she said with that pleasant air of real interest which she always managed to throw into her inquiries as to other people's concerns. No one could have guessed that she had disliked and disapproved the expedition alluded to. "My granddaughter told me that she was going to join the party."

"She was very keen about it!" he answered shortly.

"Gwendolen has a *craze* for children!" Mrs. Granard said.

In another person's mouth the statement might have sounded like an attempt at explaining away the oddness of her descendant's overture; but it came so suavely and naturally from Mamma's lips that no one could suspect her of any *arrière pensée*.

"She was very kind to the little chap!"

returned Hatton, with a grudging note in his voice, adding, with a sort of awkward compunction, "I *did* thank her."

"I am sure *that* was unnecessary! As I told you, her love of children amounts to a craze; and she thought your little boy so much to be pitied because he had never been to the Zoo!"

The artist paused with suspended brush. "He does not get out much, poor little chap! I haven't time to take him, and there is no one else."

A polite but also sympathetic pause followed. Clearly the mother of the unseen phenomenon, whether wed or unwed, was non-existent.

"The streets are not what they were when I was last at home," continued the father, with a furrow of real anxiety on his forehead; "these motors and all! And he is a bit young to be turned out into the streets to look after himself."

"How old is he?"

"He is not very far short of seven."

Mrs. Granard broke into delicate mirth. "Poor little fellow! I should think he *was* scarcely old enough to face Piccadilly Circus!"

Hatton did not share his interlocutor's mirth. His sense of humour was not strong, and he seldom laughed at any jokes but his own.

"He will have to begin soon!" he returned. "When you have got to shift for yourself through life, you can't take to it too early! I was packed

off to school before I was his age, and I do not think I am much the worse for it!"

He squared his shoulders, and looked half appealingly at Lucia, in hopes of seeing some confirmation of his own opinion of his merits in her eyes. Needless to say that they disdained to meet his.

"But I should think that you were an exception to most rules," Mamma said with her soothing and titillating look of interest. "Perhaps your little boy is so too. I must see him some day, and judge for myself."

"I will bring him with me to-morrow."

Mrs. Granard gave a—to the stranger—inaudible gasp. Unlike her granddaughter, she had no "craze" for children. They were apt to stand too near her, sometimes to touch her, often to ask her indecorous questions. Not long ago, one had put to her the dispassionate query, "How soon she thought she should die?" so she said, "That *will* be delightful," and slid away from the subject.

But Mr. Hatton was not a person easy to be slidden from, and at his departure, his sitter being engaged in colloquy with Miss Baskerville, who, despite all prohibitions, had presented herself before the sitting was ended, he said to Lucia, with an air of what she felt was meant for deference—

"Then, if it is agreeable to all parties, I will bring my little chap to-morrow."

"I think you had better, perhaps, put it off for

a day or two," she answered, half absently, while with inward fever she wondered whether, if she threw dignity to the winds, and went out on the landing with him, he might possibly throw the end of that sentence into her famished ears. But no! of course he would not. She pulled herself together, and went on with cold decision, "My mother might not be up to it."

"She is up to anything," he answered bluntly. "I never saw a finer old lady." And so walked off.

But next day he did not bring his "little chap."

CHAPTER XII

It was not Mamma's *fête*, yet once more all her daughters were gathered round her, on the occasion of a new subject for congratulation—Zillah Church's newly arranged marriage. They were by no means so unanimous in their opinions upon it as they had been in their triumphant joy at that parent's completion of her seventieth year.

Not one of the three wedded ones had as yet enjoyed the advantage of a *tête-à-tête* discussion of the subject with their parent. All thought this due to accident ; but Mrs. Granard knew better. She had had more than a hint of the attitude adopted by Jane and Anne in their letters on receiving the news.

Jane had written, " I do not presume to advise you, dearest mother, who are so much wiser than any and all of us ; but can't you put the immense weight of your reprobation into the scales against this monstrous sacrifice to Moloch ? "

And Anne, in her pretty but indistinct and characterless hand, had commented after her fashion

on the situation. "Of course, he is very rich; and no one knows better than I, by its absence, how well money oils the wheels of life; but oh! darling mother, is not he *rather old* and greasy for dear little Zillah? And the boys tell me that he does not bear a very good character!"

Since Zillah's grandmother had not the smallest intention of opposing the proposed alliance, the fewer that she allowed herself to hear of such criticisms on the future bridegroom, the better. So all four daughters sat round the maternal sofa, Sarah unfolding her tale, the others listening in different attitudes of covert protest, and Mamma smiling tempered approbation.

"If he can put up with an old woman who cannot get off her sofa to welcome him, Zillah must bring him to see me."

Any allusion by her mother to her own age always brought the tears to Anne Baskerville's eyes; but she whisked them away, because she knew that it annoyed her sisters to see them.

Sarah responded, and believed that it would be the brightest moment in the life of the illustrious Hebrew in question when he bowed over Mrs. Granard's hand; and went on encouraged with her high tale.

"It was a perfect thunderbolt to us! We had not the *slightest* idea of it! Zillah was *so* sly. When I reproached her about it, she said, 'Why

should I have bothered you about it, mother, until it was quite certain ?' "

"Until what was quite certain ?" The interjection was Jane Swinderby's.

"Oh, I suppose until she felt quite sure of her own feelings. I dare say at first she felt that his being older than herself was a drawback."

"How old is he ?"

"I really do not know."

"And as he is not in any book, one cannot find out !"

This was not quite amiable, but Jane felt better after having said it.

"She does not pretend to be in love with him," continued Mrs. Church, with probably a sub-consciousness that the atmosphere was charged with some other element than sympathy. "She said herself, very sensibly, 'I am not the least in love with him, mother ; but I do not think that is my way, and I do like to be comfortable ! I never could go through the dreadful manœuvre of making sixpence do the work of a shilling.' "

Anne bent her meek head over her eternal embroidery with wrung withers. Was not her life passed in not altogether successful attempts to execute the manœuvre thus contemptuously alluded to ? Was not the sale of the beautiful needlework, over which she wore out her pale eyes, dedicated to secret tips to expensive sons ? But then how much

she had to set against her poverty? As the images of her long, impertinent, yet loving children and of her *débonnaire* husband rose before her, she raised her head just in time to hear Mamma's suave utterance—

"Dear little Zillah! How sensible of her! As a friend of mine used to say, 'Married poverty is so undignified!' Not," she added quickly, in soft fear lest Anne should be wounded, "that it need necessarily be or always is so!"

But she need not have been alarmed. In Mrs. Baskerville's kind if not very wise heart, pity for and not envy of her niece was the predominant emotion. Through her young people she had heard some rumours of Jack!

And Lucia! As she sat bent-headed, too, with close-shut lips, there passed before her inner vision the lonely little pinched face, the desperate eyes, the small, tragic voice nerving its owner to swallow her hideous pill, with the deadly drug of a selfish lover's consolation that they might "see each other more comfortably if she were married." Ought Lucia's lips to keep shut with such knowledge as hers behind them? Ought she not to cry aloud in protest before it was too late? And if she did, what would happen? Mamma would feel faint, and Sarah would bear a lifelong grudge against her, and Iphigenia would mount the altar all the same!

"I do not for a moment blink the fact that it is a *mariage de raison*," Mrs. Church said, looking round on her audience, as if to say that she was ready to take up any glove thrown down in challenge to her. "But so was mine! and you all know that I have not, and have never had, cause to repent it!"

Though all the listeners felt, none uttered, a protest against the incompleteness of the parallel drawn; but the many more numerous years and fewer charms possessed by Sarah at the time of her judicious matrimonial compact, combined with the total absence, in her case, of the Jack-factor, brought home to Mrs. Church's family the falsity of the comparison. Perhaps the drawer of that comparison felt the weight of that dissentient silence, for she looked round again, appealingly this time, at her kin.

"It is not as if I had put any pressure upon her! So far from doing so, I said to her, 'Are you *quite* sure that you like him enough to marry him? Are you quite sure that there is no one else?' And she gave a little start—I think she was shocked at my making such a suggestion—and answered very firmly, 'Quite sure! No one!'"

There would still have been perfect silence if Mamma had not sighed tenderly, but with no shade of incredulity or compassion in her voice—

"Dear little Zillah!"

"Why should I—why should either of us want to hurry her into marriage?" pursued Mrs. Church, with the just indignation of one who believed—as she did—every word that she spoke. "We are, thank God, able to provide for our children more than comfortably! I am sure," searching the faces of the listening matrons for a sign of approbation, "that none of us sisters—neither of us, I mean," changing the word in allusion to Jane's childlessness, "have, or can have, any other object but our children's happiness!"

Mrs. Granard uttered a little sound of affectionate acquiescence.

"It would be some one who knew you very little that doubted it."

"She is marrying him wholly and solely because she wishes it. Reuben"—the strange name came quite glibly already—"may not be a man likely to take the fancy of an ordinary girl; but Zillah is not an ordinary girl. She says emphatically that she wishes to marry him, and since neither she nor Keturah has ever had a thought hidden from me, I do not know why I should begin to disbelieve her at this time of day!"

Having thus delivered herself, and after having reverently and fondly kissed her mother's hand, Mrs. Church left the room with flags flying and all the honours of war, having, if not convinced her sisters, at least, without much intention, made two

of them wince—Anne, by her hint at the noble fortunes that would devolve upon the young Churches; and Jane, by the allusion to her barrenness. Jane always said that she thanked God upon her knees for having spared her the curse of children, a race of whom she always asserted her excessive detestation. But nobody believed her.

The exit of Mrs. Church loosened the strings of the remaining tongues.

"What a sacrifice to Moloch!" Jane said, lifting hands and eyes, and repeating the phrase that she had used in her letter to her mother, and upon which, in her own opinion, she could not improve.

"Do you think that she really believes that Zillah and Keturah have never had a thought hidden from her?" Anne asked with a pitying intonation.

For once even Lucia broke through her rule of silence in the family discussions.

"Mother," she said, "do not you think that some one ought to tell Sarah about '*Jack*'?"

"Was he the man with whom Zillah sat in a four-wheeler till four o'clock in the morning in Grosvenor Square on the night of Lady Shepperton's ball?" Jane inquired.

Encouraged by this lead, Mrs. Baskerville threw herself upon her parent's nearest hand, exclaiming emotionally—

"Oh, dearest mother, wouldn't it come best from *you?*"

But Mamma had shut her eyes. With her usual perfect tact, she had turned a little faint, and so saved herself from any embarrassing pledge.

CHAPTER XIII

"Yes, breezy! You have hit upon exactly the right word, as you always do," Mrs. Swinderby said to her mother a day later, after the presentation of the artist to the sisterhood. "He made me laugh when he commanded Sarah to stand out of his light, and ordered Lucia from the room."

"I should not have paid the slightest attention to his 'order,'" put in Lucia, doggedly and flushing, "if I had not seen that Mamma wished me to go."

Mrs. Granard looked at her Flower de Luce—suddenly turned into a very red lily—in mildest surprise.

"I never wish you to go—any of you, I mean," she answered, looking round on her progeny with her exquisite impartiality. "You know that I am never *really* myself, except when you are all round me. But Mr. Hatton seemed to think that the room was too full."

Lucia did not respond; but presently, since for the moment she was not wanted, retired in dull anger to her den. She had been angry all day, ever since Hatton's dismissal of her—the angrier

because instinct told her that it was pity for her fagged looks that had dictated his action. What right had he to pity her? What business had he to look at her enough to see that she *was* fagged? Yet it *was* a kindness on his part; for another angry instinct whispered her that in sending her away he was robbing himself of what he, unlike the rest of the world, had the intolerable insolence to prize—her society.

She felt something like a fox whose earth is stopped, on finding her room already occupied by Gwen, who was sitting in Lucia's only comfortable chair, with an odd-looking little boy on her knees.

"I have brought you a gentleman friend, as his parent would express it," she said, looking round laughingly. "Yes; this is the infant Hatton! Isn't he a queer little product? Would you mind keeping him a bit? We have been feeding the ducks in St. James's Park, and enjoying ourselves very much, haven't we?" The little boy made an odd grave inclination of assent. "But we have spent so much time that I am already late for an engagement to fetch Jessie from Bart's. They have had a very interesting thing on there this morning—a man who swallowed a corkscrew thirty years ago, and——"

Lucia lifted her hands in prohibition. "Please, in mercy! And what am I to do with him?" looking without enthusiasm at the little intruder.

"Oh, he does not need much entertaining,"

replied Miss Baskerville, airily; and, setting down the child, disappeared without further apology.

The two persons thus left to a compulsory *tête-à-tête* looked at each other for a moment or two with silent distrust. Lucia was not one of the large class who think that all children *must* be interesting, simply by right of their helplessness and immaturity; but she had her partialities among the ranks of infancy, and could bring down her mind without difficulty to "the level of the nursery fender." The absolute inability on her part to trace at first any likeness between this puny child and his objectionable parent relaxed her muscles and softened her voice.

"So you liked the ducks?" she said with interest, as if to convey that in her alarming grown-up mind there also lurked a partiality for those pampered "volatiles."

"Yes, Signora; they are very beautiful!"

She looked at him with unfeigned surprise. Why did he call her "Signora"? and why was he so dark? and why did he speak with a foreign accent? The explanation—one not much coloured by Christian charity—at once flashed across Miss Granard's mind. Hatton had beguiled some pretty Italian contadina, or ignorant Spanish peasant woman, into marrying him; and had then killed her with unkindness, and was now pursuing the same course with her orphaned son.

The explanation produced an instant invitation to the small stranger to sit on her knee. He accepted, though there was still a look of apprehension in the dark velvet of his eyes. "Cowed, of course, by habitual cruelty," was Lucia's inward comment; and her arm went tenderly round the thin little figure. "What is your name, dear?" she asked kindly.

"My name is Diego, Signora."

"*Diego!* That is not an English name." The dark little face flushed, and angry tears sprang into the child's eyes.

"But I *am* an English boy! My father is an English man, and I *am* an English boy! When the lady who keeps our lodgings said that I was not an English boy, I struck her—I struck her in the face!"

As he spoke he doubled his microscopic fist, and a boastful sound came into his treble voice, which, had there been any doubt as to his paternity, would have set that doubt at rest. Tiny, fragile, with his foreign accent and his Southern eyes, he was yet the unmistakable son and heir of the blond, thickset British bounder whom Miss Granard's soul abhorred.

"That was not pretty behaviour!" she said coldly, and turned over in her mind whether she should set him down.

Before she had decided one way or the other, the door opened, and the little boy's father entered.

After that, decision was needless ; for, with a cry of joy, the child had sprung off her knees into his father's arms.

The action was in annoying contradiction with her hypothesis of their relations ; and added to her vexation at Hatton's intrusion.

"Hullo ! how did *you* come here ?" he asked in his unrefined, rough voice, through the surprise of which pierced a tone of exasperating pleasure at the situation. "Where are your manners ? Go back to that lady at once ?"

But Diego did not make the smallest pretence of obeying the behest, but, putting his arm as far as it would go round his father's neck, poured into his ear an incoherent but ecstatic narrative of his morning's adventures : the walk with the lady, and the ducks—many ducks, splendid ducks—that he had seen, and not only seen, but fed ! As the narrative proceeded, a softened look of gratitude and diffident pleasure came into the man's assured eyes.

"Is it possible," he asked, "that you have been so good as to take this little wretch out for a walk?"

"No," she answered, "it is not ! My niece, Miss Baskerville, who is passionately fond of children, took him, and left him here in my charge while she fulfilled an engagement of her own."

At her rigid look and cold explanation the elation died out of Hatton's face.

"I hope he has not been troublesome," he said almost humbly.

"No, he has been quite good!" Then, her heart melting somewhat at the sight of the poor little creature, whose destitution of love was so plainly evidenced by his clinging so closely to such a refuge, she added, with a strangled smile, "Though he gave utterance to some very murderous sentiments."

"He is not much of a fellow!" the father said fondly, and as if hoping to be contradicted.

But Lucia had forgotten the child. Here was her opportunity. To-day Gwen could not make one of her ill-timed irruptions; to-day Lucia actually had a quarter of an hour—ten minutes to dispose of as she pleased. In a quarter of an hour, nay, in ten minutes, she might learn all that she ached to know. Diego would be no hindrance. And yet how could she do such violence to her whole nature, to all the hidden delicacies of her heart and mind, as to introduce it in *such* a *milieu?* If her next speech were an approach to the subject, it was certainly a very indirect one.

"Am I wanted? Were you sent to fetch me?"

"No," he answered, "I was not; and I should not have come if I had been! Nobody ought to want you when you look as played-out as you do to-day."

If his aim had been to freeze her up, he could not have chosen a better method.

"If you will allow me to say so, I think that is my affair!"

For a moment he was staggered, and kept silence; then seemed to embrace a sudden resolution.

"Why are you always so down upon me?" he asked with elemental directness. "All the rest of your family make much of me! Not one of them but seems to have taken more or less of a fancy to me! But you——" He paused, but no response came. "Why do you dislike me so much?"

"If I dislike you, as you have no right to assume," she answered, and her words seemed cut out of steel, "it is perhaps partly because you like yourself so immensely."

It was a relief to utter this pungent incivility; yet she felt ashamed when it had passed her lips. He took the blow in silence at first, as if he were too profoundly surprised by it to find any immediate answer.

"Is that the way that it strikes you?" he said slowly at last. "Well, there may be something in it; but, after all, I am not a bad fellow, and why should I pretend that I think I am?"

"I do not wish you to pretend anything!" she answered, going on snubbing him as if she could not help it. "But aggressive self-assertion is always trying! I should not have said so if you had not provoked me into it by asking me an unjustifiable question as to my opinion of you."

"I can't see that it was unjustifiable!" he rejoined after another pause, spent apparently in weighing the justice of the accusation. "I wanted to find out what you had got against me. Now I know! Is there anything else?"

The question was put with no symptom of anger, but as if dictated by a real wish for enlightenment. Yet it failed to disarm Lucia. Her wrongs welled up to her lips.

"If you will have it—you have brought it upon yourself—I think your manners might be improved. You take too much upon yourself. What right had you to send me out of the room to-day?"

The surprise, which since Miss Granard's first onslaught had dwelt in his eyes, deepened. "I did it out of kindness. You looked so dead-beat."

She drew up her head haughtily. "Thank you, I have no need of kindness! We are already under an obligation to you, and I regret having been led into such plain speaking; but, as I said before, you brought it on yourself."

"I am not very thin-skinned," he answered, without any of the boastful air which often accompanied his announcement of his qualities. "There may be something in it! I'll think it over!"

He set Diego down on the carpet, and turned towards the door. But at that, across all the

turmoil of exasperation at her own rudeness, and at his unequalled power of ruffling her, flashed the sense of having thrown away the opportunity for which she had been so famished, and which had so unexpectedly come her way. She put out her hand, as if to arrest him.

"Before you go, I have a question to ask you. We were interrupted the other day——"

The door flew open.

"Well, how has the desperate character I planted on you been conducting himself?" Gwen cried.

And the chance was gone.

CHAPTER XIV

"You should be, like me, free from prejudice on every subject," Miss Baskerville admonished her aunt later, when the Hattons, father and son, had departed, which they did almost immediately after her arrival. "You do not know how much more one gets out of life! Almost everybody has something interesting to say, and you do not get hold of it if you are put off by a cockney accent or a Colonial twang, or a missing '*h*' here and there. Not but what in this case the '*h*'s' are unimpeachable; he really isn't a bad little sort, and I happen to know that, as he himself says, he *is* ready to help a lame dog over a stile. I wish you would try to get on better with him, for he has evidently come to stay. They have all followed Granny's lead, and taken a fancy to him. They say—Granny said it first—that he is so——"

"Don't!" cried Lucia, putting out her hand with her accustomed trick of prohibition. "I know what you are going to say. I shall never be able to bear the adjective again."

"Well, I wish you would try to get to know him better."

"You do not further your desire much by invariably bursting in before I have exchanged two sentences with him."

"I did not know that he was here; I came to fetch Diego. I never met Jessie after all. The man who swallowed the corkscrew thirty years ago——"

"Don't!" Lucia said again. "You know that I always bar anecdotes from Bart's."

"'Bar *bon-mots* from Bart's!' What a pretty alliteration! Well, you do not know what you lose!"

She went off laughing, and repeating her silly sentence in a sort of sing-song. And Lucia remained behind, with a vague yet hot suspicion that she herself was the lame dog whom Hatton meant to help over the stile. How on earth was he going to do it? To offer to replace her in her present situation? She, too, laughed, though without the young-animal gaiety of Gwen.

As the days went on, it seemed as if the contingency at which Miss Granard had ruefully smiled was about to happen. More and more was her company dispensed with during the *sittings*. It was not that Hatton repeated his offence of compassionate dismissal, but that Mamma did not want her. From time immemorial it had been an

unwritten law that when mirth and amusing company were in question, Lucia could be dispensed with. From her dull room she could hear the peals of laughter which greeted the sallies of that humour upon which Mamma had set the seal of her approbation.

The season was in full swing, and all the married daughters and their husbands more or less *up*. Not a morning passed but that one or other of them dropped in to help to keep the expression of animation which all wanted to eternize upon the sitter's features. To be successful they must all echo Mamma's mirth at Hatton's bad jokes and boorish speeches. Apparently, judging by the sounds that reached her ears, they had no difficulty in doing so.

"What *sheep* they all are!" she said to herself bitterly; but the sense of her own nicer discrimination in the matter of wit failed to cheer her.

She might have utilized her own liberty to go out—to see sights or visit friends. Instead, she remained in her den, listening, through whatever employment she forced herself to, for the sound of the step of the departing artist, and for that new violation of her privacy which never came. Evidently he had acquiesced in her acknowledgment of repugnance towards him: she had shut herself off from communication with him. And in his clumsy way he had meant well.

They did not meet again until the portrait was finished, and the whole family met in conclave to inspect it. The presence of the painter would have prevented any adverse criticism, but none such seemed even latent.

Mrs. Baskerville, of course, cried. "It is *her!* —her very self!" she said.

Mamma, who knew that that choke in Anne's voice was always followed by a pounce upon one of her hands, raised both in the air, as if with a graceful gesture of admiration of the skill displayed.

Mrs. Swinderby was also moved; but, determined not to show it in foolish gush like Anne's, remarked, in a common-sense voice—

"Isn't there something a little odd about the right thumb?"

"It really reminds one of Sargent!" was Sarah's enthusiastic comment. "Doesn't it, Otto?"

Otto's assent, if it was one, came in the form of a grunt. In reality he was revolving in his mind projects of employing this clever nobody upon members of his own family, and he thought that such exaggerated praise might raise his prices.

Gwen proclaimed her approbation with her usual confident resonance, looking over everybody's head to do it.

"Well," she said, "your hands may not be much to look at, thanks to your culpable obstinacy

in refusing my professional offers, but they certainly know how to hold a brush and palette."

At that Granny might have winced slightly—the only way in which her admirably controlled nature ever showed disapprobation; but she was happily engaged in listening to the excuses of her favourite Baskerville son-in-law, who had come in late and last, but who was persuading her, in a voice that the deaf adder could neither have misheard nor disbelieved, that if he could have obeyed the dictates of his loving heart, he would have been first and earliest. It was not true, and Granny knew that it was not, but while you were with Freddy Baskerville, you believed *anything* that he told you.

Mrs. Church *had* heard, and had shuddered, but Hatton had smiled.

It was not his original method of receiving Gwen's absurd *manicurean* offers. What had changed him? Had he merely grown acclimatized to her? or was he mollified by the treats that her abounding good nature lavished upon Diego? or was there some third cause for the alteration in his attitude towards her? an alteration of which not for the first time Lucia now perceived evidences. It seemed impossible, yet hints of some sort of understanding, some ground of common interest between them, reached her now and again.

"Do not you think that you are rather overdoing your friendship for Mr. Hatton?" she asked

one day, when chance had brought her face to face with the odd trio seated on a bench in St. James's Park. "It may land you in disagreeables that you do not reckon upon."

"I never reckon upon disagreeables beforehand, which accounts for my meeting with so few. Are you afraid of my raising false hopes in that young and susceptible breast?"

"No," replied Lucia, slowly. "That in any case would be impossible; and I hear through the lady who first introduced him to Mamma, that he is more than rumoured to have left a Spanish wife in California. Of course, he may have killed her; but one cannot count upon *that*."

"He may have six Spanish wives, and have killed them all, for what I care! My intentions are strictly dishonourable."

"What disgusting things you do say by way of wit!" Lucia cried, with an angry darting of grey eyes into her niece's impudently dancing green ones; then bethought herself of the futility of wrath with Gwen, irreclaimable, outrageous, yet never getting into any serious scrapes.

Would it not be better to try to extract from her that information which Miss Granard was now hopeless of obtaining from him who could have given it more nearly at first-hand? It cost her a painful effort to re-open of her own accord the old wound from which Gwen's resolute inquisitiveness

had torn the veil; yet it had come to seem the least of two evils.

"I cannot imagine what subject of conversation you can have in common."

"Can't you?"

"What do you talk about?"

"Hundreds of things. I assure you that on some topics he is most illuminating."

A slight pause. "What sort of topics?"

The ready Gwen hesitated; then took refuge in banter.

"Ah! would not you like to know?"

"Yes, I should," replied Lucia, firmly. It was infinitely difficult; yet, having begun, she would go on. "I want to know if he has ever again mentioned Mr. Carruthers to you?"

This time Gwen's hesitation was more pronounced, and she half turned away her head.

"Oh, yes—now and again."

"What did he say?"

"*What did he say!*" repeating the question with the evident object of giving herself more time to find an answer. "He said that he had not heard anything of him for three years."

"Was that quite the last time that he had heard?"

"Yes."

"And *what* had he heard?"

No one excelled Miss Baskerville in the delicate

art of conversational embroidery, but she jibbed at a direct lie. For almost the first time in her history she made no answer. Lucia was too pale already to turn pale, and her next speech was given steadily.

"I see that you know, and that it was something bad; but I do not know why you should refuse to tell me! What can it matter to me, after all these years?"

"Doesn't it matter to you? Don't you care?" cried Gwen; her tongue loosed again, and in a tone of the liveliest interest and curiosity. "I thought that with people of *your* date that kind of feeling was eternal! I imagined that that was one of the points in which we have so much improved upon you. But if you *do not care* any longer, that changes the whole aspect of the affair. We—I—— I don't know what I was going to say."

"Don't—I—care?" repeated Lucia, very slowly. The question was not addressed to her hearer. It was put to herself, as if she were some one else. "Lucia does not care! Lucia will not mind! It is all one to Lucia!" She repeated the sentences so familiar to them both, in a level voice, without resentment or anger. "No; of course, I do not care!"

CHAPTER XV

By the time that Mrs. Granard's portrait was finished, her family had worked her adjective descriptive of the artist so hard that she herself had grown tired of it, and had invented another that equally showed her usual happy certainty of touch. Hatton was no longer "breezy;" he became instead "crisp." "Crisp" he remained until the picture was finished, framed, and hung, and later still, when he had received Mrs. Baskerville's invitation to join the family party which always assembled at her country house immediately after Goodwood. To such a pitch of intimacy had his crispness brought him.

But in point of fact, it was not only his crispness that had done it! Another motive lurked behind Anne's proffer of hospitality.

"So you have asked Mr. Hatton to Baskerville?" Lucia said, in a tone from which she took no pains to exclude her excessive surprise at the news.

Anne was quite used to disapproval of her actions on the part of her sisters, so she only answered meekly—

"Yes, I have. Do you mind?"

"Why should *I* mind? But I thought you always kept that party strictly to ourselves!"

"So I did. So I do! So I wish to! But I thought that he would amuse Mamma. I am always afraid of her being bored in our dull neighbourhood, where there is no one in the least capable of appreciating her brilliance!"

"It is very good for her to have a rest! It *must* be tiring to any one—to even Mamma—always to have to be brilliant; and, after all"—with a smile—"I do not see why you need apologize for inviting what guests you like to your own house!"

But Anne—it was her nature—went on apologizing—

"You see, we could not in any case have kept it quite to ourselves this year. There is Reuben, who must come, and I can't quite feel him one of us yet, can you? He wants Mr. Hatton to take a sketch of Zillah, so I thought it would be such a good opportunity when they were both staying in the house together; and I also thought"—more slowly—"that if he was *at* Baskerville, and had his tools—his brushes and things, I mean—with him, he might like to do some little thing of Freddy."

Lucia laughed. Anne's uxoriousness often amused her sisters.

"Ah! the mischief is out! Now I see!"

Mrs. Baskerville's thin white cheek grew faintly tinted.

"Well, it really is a scandal," she cried, no longer apologetic, but confidently assertive, "that there is absolutely nothing to show what he was like after he is gone except photographs, and that miserable oil daub, taken when he was eighteen, and which is as much like him as it is like you or me."

"Why should not Mr. Hatton do us *all* in a family group, each with an orange in our hand, like the Flamboroughs in 'The Vicar of Wakefield'?" Lucia asked, laughing again, but rather drily.

Anne was not to be diverted from her purpose by a jest.

"It is as well to get hold of him *now*, while he is unknown and *cheap*. Of course, when Mamma's portrait is seen, his prices will go up with a bound."

Lucia sighed. It was clear that her family had *se donné le mot* to get as much as they could out of their guest, and thereby to render her own incivility to him ever more heinous and difficult.

Mrs. Baskerville put her purpose into execution no later than the next day, when Hatton had called for no particular reason beyond the encouragement which he now received to make his appearance at all hours.

Mamma, with her usual penetration, saw what was coming, and tried to stop it, but in vain. There was something of "Simo's Mate" in Anne:

"No mule so meek! no mule so obstinate!"

And after every deft interruption, she cropped mildly up again, prefacing her request with a half-veiled allusion to her regretted inability to pay a large price for what would be to her so beyond price.

The painter listened with more patience than might have been expected of him, and as soon as he had grasped Mrs. Baskerville's havering drift, at once bluntly offered to "do" Freddy for nothing.

"Oh, but this is impossible! It has no name," Mrs. Granard cried, lifting both hands in the air in genuine dismay that the prestige of the family should be lowered for an object which would give nobody but Anne any pleasure. "You must never mention such an idea again, unless you wish to quarrel with us all. Are not we already under a heavy enough obligation to you?"

The boastful look, hated of Lucia's soul, came into Hatton's face.

"Oh, you need not trouble about that! I knock off these sort of things so easily; and I never was much of a chap to bother about money. I was always——" He stopped in mid-autobiography, dead short, as if he had been shot. His eyes had met Lucia's fixed upon him in steely distaste.

Every one else looked surprised, and awaited the resumption of his broken sentence.

Lucia never knew whether or not it *was* resumed, as she stole out of the room. Ten minutes later a knock at her door called forth a careless

permission to "come in." It could not be Hatton, since he never knocked. But it *was* he; and he now stood with a new diffidence on the threshold.

"I just dropped in—I thought that perhaps you would not mind my dropping in just to say that I was afraid, by the way you looked at me, that you thought that was a bit of brag of mine just now—upstairs, I mean," jerking his head ungracefully in the direction of the ceiling.

"Since you ask me," she answered, annoyed at being driven into a corner, "I did not think it in very good taste."

He nodded assentingly, "I am afraid I am not much of a judge of taste." A moment later, "I should not wonder if you thought that I was too much given to *gassing*."

His hearer smiled against her will. "It is really no business of mine; but if you will have it, I should say that it was rather a snare to you."

Again he nodded, in somewhat disarming assent, and it was not till after a minute or two that he took up his own defence.

"I suppose that if you had always had to play your own hand, and that it has never been an easy one, that you get into the way of asserting yourself, and you can't leave it off when it is not any longer needed."

"I dare say not."

"And of course"—in a tone of resignation tinged with a *soupçon* of resentment, which pierced through a manful effort to suppress it,—"and of course, it is nothing to you whether or not I make an ass of myself?"

"It is no question of 'making an ass' of yourself," she replied, fixing her cool eyes dispassionately upon him. This was, had he but known it, in itself a gain, since up to the present time she had not been able to bear to look at him. "In this world, if you do not blow your own trumpet, you run the risk of not finding any one to blow it for you."

For a moment he stood silent, still on the threshold, then he said—

"You are a bit bitter; but I dare say you mean kindly."

Conscience forbade Miss Granard to accept this compliment.

"No," she said slowly, "I cannot conscientiously say that I do. You irritate me so much that I say rude things to you, not for your good, but to relieve my own feelings."

It was difficult for any one so sunburnt as Hatton to be seen to flush; yet the mahogany colour of the young man's face seemed to take on a slightly deeper tinge under this drastic treatment of his self-esteem; yet he nodded acquiescently—

"All right! Then I need not thank you; but all the same, though you did not mean it kindly, I

dare say I am none the worse for being taken down a peg!"

This pacific mode of accepting her treatment put Lucia so thoroughly in the wrong that she at once began to defend herself with some heat.

"I am not naturally uncivil. On the contrary, I try to be courteous to everybody. You are the only person to whom I am conscious of ever having been grossly rude. So I think you must have brought it on yourself!"

The unamiable passions are often more becoming than their gentler sisters. Anger knocked a decade off Lucia's age, the grain of her skin displayed its fineness better when wrathfully coloured; and the lines of her lips were prettier, curving in disdain, than when drooping in their usual resigned dejection.

There was a short pause; and then the occupant of the threshold made use of these unforgivable words—

"It is a great pity that you are not as nice as you look!"

Having uttered them, he wisely disappeared.

CHAPTER XVI

MEANWHILE overhead in the drawing-room two sister matrons were commenting with some asperity upon Anne's action, she having given them a free hand by removing herself at the same time as Hatton.

"What you always say, dear mother, is so admirably true," Mrs. Church began. "Married poverty *is* undignified! It certainly takes the finer edge off people's perceptions. If you had not intervened with your wonderfully ready tact, poor Anne would have jumped at Mr. Hatton's offer to paint Freddy's portrait for nothing."

Granny laughed softly. "Poor dear man! he would give one his head if it were loose!" she said in her wisely non-committal manner.

"If you ask me," put in Jane Swinderby, using the phrase which is always employed by people whose opinion has *not* been solicited, "I can't see much reason why Freddy's charms must be immortalized! I am fond of Freddy; one can't help being fond of him in a way; but he really is not such an edifying member of society that there is much need to send him down to posterity."

Mamma never differed from any of her daughters, nor ever took up the cudgels in defence of any absent person. So, though she secretly felt for her erring son-in-law a more pronounced weakness than she did for most people, it never occurred to her to embark on his defence (Freddy, indeed, was indefensible); so she only maintained that cool sweet smile, which meant whatever the person upon whom it beamed wished that it should do.

"Anne is always so occupied about what posterity will think," Mrs. Church said. "For my part I find my contemporaries quite enough to occupy me."

"If you mean that you are a good deal taken up about Zillah just now, I am sure I do not wonder," Jane replied.

It was not what her sister had meant, and she was perfectly aware of it.

"One is always 'taken up,' as you call it, with one's children, when one has the good fortune to have them!"

This was a safe throw, and Jane rose at once to it.

"*Apropos* of poor Anne's craze about posterity," she said thoughtfully, "I was reading the other day an American book which drew a clever distinction between the two classes of people—those who have nothing in the past, and everything in the future; and those who have everything in the past, and nothing in the future. The Baskervilles, of course, belong to the latter."

It did not require a conjurer to draw the inference that the Churches belonged to the former category, whose assets in the past were *nil;* but Sarah did not take up the challenge. Satisfied that her arrow had carried true to the one weak spot in Jane's armour, she felt no wish to quarrel with her sister over so indefensible a position as Otto's origin, but changed the subject to one on which she was sure of her support.

"After all," she said, "neither the past nor the future concerns any of us as much as the present; and Gwen is terribly present, isn't she?"

There was a slight pause of expectation as to where this prelude was going to lead, a pause presently broken.

"And she is so amusing that I am sure we none of us have the heart to wish her absent."

This was a slight departure from Mrs. Granard's golden rule of leaving the absent undefended, but Anne's mother was always more nervous about any criticism of her's returning to Anne's ears than to those of any of her other daughters, as Mrs. Baskerville took any such so much more seriously to heart, and made so much more commotion about them than did any of her sisters. There was a tradition as to her having once cried all night because Mamma was reported to have said that both Anne's girls' teeth wanted looking to.

"What has been her last feat?" Jane asked in

a friendly voice, the consciousness of the success of her shot bolt having soothed her, too, back into sisterliness.

"Did not you hear? When Reuben was presented to her the other day, she took the opportunity of his putting out his hand to her to make very rude comments upon its appearance, told him that she was very anxious to get up a *clientèle* in the City, and suggested that she should begin with *him!* It was a humiliating moment for us all, wasn't it, dearest mother?"

Thus directly challenged, "dearest mother" had to answer; but, as ever, she managed to keep her feet out of the snare of the fowler.

"Reuben is too good-natured and too much a man of the world to mind. After the first moment of surprise, I think he was frankly amused; he gave one of those pleasant hearty laughs of his. What a real laugh his is!"

But Mrs. Church's spirit had been too deeply moved to be diverted from her wrath by any deft compliment to the Hebrew mirth alluded to.

"I am only thankful that Otto was not present! I really dare not think what he would have done!"

This portentous hint kept the little group silent for a moment. Then Jane said bluntly—

"Why, what could he have done? Gwen is not his daughter! She might snap her fingers at him!"

"It is certainly not what *his* daughter would be

likely to do!" rejoined Mrs. Church with quiet dignity; "any more than they would be likely to call him 'Little One.'"

In this praise of her offspring there was no intention of being ludicrous, but the concatenation of ideas between the epithet quoted and the gross Teuton to whom it was hypothetically applied tickled them all so irresistibly that they broke into a laugh, in which, after a second of irresolution, Sarah herself joined.

When the mirth had died away, Granny drew a long but almost inaudible breath of relief. She knew that the ever-imminent peril for her of being asked to interfere was, for the present, past. There was so much rush and bustle attendant on the end of the season, that her gentle weapons of defence were able to remain sheathed until Goodwood was over, and the annual migration of the whole family to Baskerville was accomplished.

Some of the party could have dispensed with the yearly festivity, and replaced it by amusements and occupations of their own, but to do so would have cut Anne so deeply to the heart, that none of them had the cruelty to suggest it. It was *the* event of Anne's year. She acquiesced, indeed, in the absence of Sarah's sons, and in the only occasional appearances of that lady's husband, but for the rest her tale of guests must be full, or the air was rent with her lamentations.

Anne was one of those sincerely hospitable people who never stop to think whether what they offer is worth the acceptance of the recipients, but give of their best with both hands for the sheer pleasure of giving. How many *goings without*, pinchings, scrapings, and private abstentions generally through the rest of the year went to the carrying out of the ten days' entertaining, even Anne's mother and sisters could only conjecture, for Mrs. Baskerville, though open enough upon the subject of her general impecuniosity, was jealously secretive as to what her party cost her, and it was only in a whisper into the deep well of Mamma's ear that even Sarah durst drop her yearly regret that poor Anne "should think it necessary to entertain, without any appliances for doing it properly."

But after all, poor Anne had some appliances for making people happy in fine summer weather. A park full, not of deer, for they had gone some years ago to pay for one of Freddy's *amourettes;* but of bracken and knolls and trees which, though they showed to the eye of an expert the absence of the woodman, yet played their part very nobly and pleasantly on the August landscape. Had she not also a charming heterogeneous old house, rather like Freddy, with a Jacobean front and a Queen Anne wing, and an early Georgian afterthought? Had not she also several Hoppners and Lawrences and Cotes, besides an unexhibited Romney, for which

Reuben Silbermein had made a bid the moment he saw it; not to speak of a "School" of Velasquez, and a Luini, with a query, and a possible Cima?

She had had a good deal longer list ten—five years ago; but there was no use in saying anything about that; and Freddy was always dreadfully sorry, but of course they had to go! By dint of arranging the survivors to "inhabit large" like Milton's fallen angels, the gaps were not *very* perceptible, though here and there a large and more faded space in the universally dimmed crimson of the walls told a tale. There was no electric light nor telephone; and bath-rooms were few and far between, a lack angrily resented by Otto, with the more intensity because of the arrears of soap in early life that he was conscious of having to make up.

Every year there was the recurrent anxiety as to Mamma having good weather for her migration, an odious memory of her having once caught a chill owing to a sudden drop in the temperature on her way down haunting her daughters' hearts. But this year the weather had been as if made to order; and Mamma had thoroughly enjoyed her journey, made by easy stages in one of Sarah's luxurious carriages, full of cushions, and nice things to eat and drink, and amusing books for Lucia to read aloud to her when she grew tired of looking at the passing scenes. But that was not often, for Mamma loved a beautiful country, and was wonderfully observant,

and saw things that other people did not, and made them in her descriptions sound even prettier than they really were.

Sarah and Jane and Anne always said how much they envied Lucia for having Mamma all to herself at her very best in that leisurely long drive; and Lucia said she did not wonder at them. At least that had been her invariable rejoinder until this year, when she had apparently mislaid it.

Otto always made the same joke about his mother-in-law's journey. He always called it "The Transit of Venus;" and Mamma—bless her!—always laughed so naturally that, if you had not known to the contrary, you would have sworn that she heard it for the first time.

The party in all its variety had now arrived; and, having had tea, were forgetting the dust of trains and motors amid the groves and pleasaunces of the delightful old garden, which—again like Freddy—had apparently always been allowed to do exactly what it liked. What it liked now was to be riotously bowery and flowery, deeply shady, yet sun-filtered.

With the exception of Mamma, who had been borne away to rest, the master of the house was the only person who was not enjoying his own "coolth and greenth." He had not yet turned up; but then he had sent such a deeply regretful, affectionate, long, explanatory, and very expensive

telegram, that it was impossible that any one could take umbrage at his absence.

Otto had joined his daughter and her *fiancé*, and was observing to the latter how soon he would have all that trash—indicating the snapdragon and linaria, that niched in every crevice—off the old walls, if they were *his*. Reuben assented warmly. He had rather that his *tête-à-tête* had not been intruded on by his future father-in-law, but since he was there, it was not uninteresting to help him to plan hypothetical atrocities, constructive and destructive.

Zillah walked between them, silent, and smiling deferentially if she met her father's eye. Behind the impenetrable mask of her lily face memory was busy. Last year Jack had happened to be calling on the day of her arrival; had happened to meet her in the "Lady's Parlour," a green retreat hollowed out of a deep yew hedge. They had not troubled their heads much about appraising the old lead figures that stood around it. They had both lost a good deal of money the night before, she remembered —a good deal, but not nearly so much as she had lost since. They talked of that. They talked of other things, too.

In a different part of the widespread domain, three persons were seated on a lichened stone bench —a broad man, a long woman, and between them an odd-looking little boy.

"You have stripped a peg, as I told you not," Gwen was saying, reproachfully. "I told you to have him properly fitted out at Swears and Wells'."

"I did mean to," the man replied crestfallenly; "but I was a good deal run last week, and I saw a little figure at a shop-door, that I thought looked about his size; but I suppose that one ought never to trust to the eye in a case of measurement. They do seem a bit roomy, now he has got them on."

Miss Baskerville's answer was in indignant demonstration to take up large handfuls of poor Diego's superfluous drapery in her strong fingers.

"Those dreadful dummies never fit anybody! and, poor little shrimp! any one could see at a glance that he is not stock size." Then, perceiving the real discomfiture in Hatton's face, she added good-naturedly, and in a strain of hereditary hospitality, "I dare say that they will be a better fit by the time he goes. We must keep him out of doors all day in the sunshine and air. You will like that, won't you, Diego?"

"Oh yes, Signora! Are there—are there any *ducks?*" He lowered his voice, as if the words were almost too sacred to speak aloud.

"Ducks! I believe you! Geese, peacocks, ostriches, eagles, phœnixes!" She broke into a kind-hearted laugh of amusement at the crescendo

of rapturous interest expressed by the child's face as each noun of splendid promise left her lips.

Hatton did not laugh; he was not much given to that exercise; but he looked gratefully at her, though without the smallest grain of that admiration which would have been inconvenient to them both.

"Any news?" she asked, changing suddenly to a new topic.

He shook his head. "Fitch has not answered my letter: he must be out of England, and I heard yesterday that Dunster had gone to Manitoba."

"H'm! So the last *authentic* fact that we have to go upon—I do not count that horrid rumour as to his being in gaol—is that three and a half years ago he is known to have been a Tammany runner at Washington?"

"Yes."

"That is not much, is it?"

He shook his head. "You know that I have never liked the job. I do not believe for a moment that she would thank us, if she knew."

"Why should she ever know, if it comes to nothing? And if it does—if we bring him back to her in triumph after all these years!"

Her narrow, green eyes danced with expectant pleasure as she spoke; but his straightforward, sea-blue ones caught no reflex of their gaiety.

"He won't be much like the chap that went away! And that story about his being—locked up

was, I find, more than a rumour. I asked the chap that told me about it again last week, and he seemed to think that there was very little doubt about it."

"I wish that you would not listen to all the lies that the *chaps* in the street tell you!" she cried, with one of her sudden spurts of petulance, which—whether from having grown used to them, or from having in life faced worse lightnings than those from a young woman's eyes, took no effect whatever upon him.

"I think that we had better take no further steps without her leave!" he said doggedly.

His companion flashed out upon him. "*Her leave!* Do you suppose that *any* woman—any woman, I mean, of *her* date and school—would move a finger to bring back *any* man who had left her for any cause?" Then with a drop from real fire to cheap cynicism, "Of course, you know that my view of the relations of the sexes is a different one, and that I see no reason why the initiative should come from one side more than the other."

"I know that I have heard you talk a great deal of nonsense on the subject," he answered rudely.

CHAPTER XVII

The next day was Anne's birthday, and broke in sunshine literal and metaphorical. There had been a fear expressed over-night that Freddy might not be able to get back for it; but those who expressed such an apprehension little realized the strength of his conjugal tenderness.

Having been unable to leave the place where he was—he did not exactly say where or why—until after all the trains had left, he hired a motor and arrived at three o'clock in the morning, sooner than that the dawn of Anne's natal day should find him absent from her side. The motor was not a cheap mode of progression, and the already overworked servants had to sit up for him, as, of course, the poor fellow must have something to eat when he arrived. But he apologized so very kindly to them for the trouble he was giving, that they felt that the blame was entirely the "missus's," and that it was far from being the master's wish that any one, however humble in the domestic scale, should have been kept from slumber on *his* account.

Of course, Anne's *fête* was a very inferior festival

to her mother's, and among the guests were some who had forgotten its existence. Among these, it is regrettable to chronicle, was Mamma herself, although, mercifully, Anne never knew it, since, being reminded in time by Lucia, Mrs. Granard repaired her oversight by the most delicately administered cheque that ever gratified a human palm.

"It was just like her," Anne said, "not to please herself by choosing some pretty thing, but to give me the opportunity of getting whatever I most needed, however uninteresting, and she knows how uninteresting my needs mostly are."

This was the very ingenuity of affection, and Lucia listened with a half-envious admiration. It was, indeed, a mercy that Anne should take the prosaic gift in such a spirit, for it would have been a pity if so large a drop of bitterness as Mamma's forgetfulness would have caused should have marred the sweetness of Mrs. Baskerville's brimming cup of happiness. For, indeed, that cup ran over as much as did her own eyes.

Freddy had always shown a tender fancifulness in his birthday presents, but this year he had outdone himself. What could surpass for taste and feeling the pendant that greeted Anne's waking eyes —the exquisite little angel in enamel holding by a slender chain a translucent enamel heart, and with its white velvet case enveloped in a paper bearing the inscription, "To the little winged keeper of my

heart : from Freddy, on the happiest day but one for him of the year" ?

"Of course, he means the 'but one' for our wedding-day !" Anne said with a sob, as she showed her treasure to her mother ; and Mrs. Granard kissed her, and passed her handkerchief over her eyes, and thought—

"What a mercy that Lucia reminded me ! And what a size the poor thing's nose has swelled to with crying !"

"Of course, she will have to end by paying for it herself !" Sarah said.

But Jane took her up rather sharply. "What does it matter who pays for it ? It is a very pretty thing, and a very pretty sentiment ; and Freddy really meant it. I have not been able to knock either a present or a sentiment out of Bob during all the years we have been married, except one bottle of eau de Cologne ; and I took that out of his dressing-room !"

Granny laughed. She certainly liked Mrs. Swinderby the best of her daughters. She was not so commercial as Sarah, nor so mawkish as Anne. In the case of Lucia, Mamma never thought whether she liked her or not, any more than she did in the case of one of her own hands or feet.

Anne's nose had almost recovered by breakfast-time, and her inward glow of felicity had made her almost young, and more than almost

pretty again. Everybody was kind, but not over-settingly so.

Hatton's address was the one that went nearest to destroying the equilibrium of her spirits.

"I wish you many happy returns of the day, Mrs. Baskerville," he said formally, and with an unnecessary employment of her name. "I have not got any present for you; but, if it would give you any pleasure, I could spend some part of to-day in making a rough sketch of your husband, and I'll undertake to say that in a couple of hours I could knock off something that would remind you more of him than what many of those Academy fellows would put six months' work into!"

It was vulgarly and boastfully worded, but there was a ring of sincere goodwill in it, and, to the silent indignation of Mrs. Church, Anne accepted rather chokingly.

The day was Sunday, and some of the party strolled pleasantly to the squat churchlet in the park, which, mercifully, no one in the parish had ever had money enough to restore, and where the parson had a delicate throat, and left out as much as he could, so that there was no great strain upon anybody's patience.

Freddy—wasn't it beautiful of him, as he never went to church?—walked ahead with Anne, carrying her Prayer-book, and having presented her with a nosegay before setting off, like any rustic Lubin.

Lucia found herself, to her surprise, following with Hatton. Accident had prevented her being alone with him since the day on which he had committed himself to the monstrous aspiration that she were "as nice as she looked;" and the memory of the outrage was in both their minds. It gave a hesitation to the man's first speech, made with an explanatory nod towards the white figure of his hostess ahead. (Anne was all in white to-day.)

"I think that she was pleased; don't you?"

Both knew that he was alluding to Hatton's offer to immortalize Mr. Baskerville.

"I am sure that she was!" replied Lucia, with a cordial warmth, which relieved his mind of the fear that his sin had been a mortal one. "Poor Anne! you could not possibly have given her greater pleasure. It was very good and generous of you; but——"

"But you did not like the way I did it. There was something wrong about that."

Such acute anxiety for her answer spoke in his voice that she turned round full upon him, a face alight with smiles and dimples. Lucia looked much younger and prettier in the large air of the country than in the narrow cincture of her Black Hole in London. Her gait, too, was freer and more graceful. Diego had at parting forced upon her a bouquet of nasturtiums. They are blossoms not generally worn as a decoration by the upper classes, but

their brave gaudy hue set off the fineness of her skin and the silky night of her hair, as they burnt upon her breast.

"I do not know why I should be your censor," she answered, but in quite a different tone from the frigid disdain of the former occasions on which she had accepted his invitation to abuse him; "but since you ask me——"

"You thought I *bucked* too much about it?" he answered in eager interruption. "I thought so myself the moment the words were out of my mouth, but then it was too late."

She was smiling still as she rejoined, "It is never too late to mend."

That brought them to the church porch, and saved Hatton from the blunder of asking her why she had taken this last lapse of his from good breeding in so different a spirit from the others.

It was a question that she put to herself several times during the parsonic-throat-shortened service. Was it that her standard of conduct and manner was becoming lowered to his level? No; for she had winced quite as much as ever at his bragging words and self-complacent tone. Was it only the influence of the day and place, the sight of Anne's happiness, the murmur of bees and breath of flowers coming through the open door and from the decked altar, that made her gentle and lenient? or was it that she was beginning to find that there

might after all be something likeable behind the coarse accents and looking out from the direct blue eyes?

It was a day of lazy, aimless pleasure—pleasure that came to the recipient without any trouble to him or herself through the elemental channels of sight, hearing, and taste; taste, for were not the apricots and greengages ripe and sun-warmed to their delicious hearts on the cherry brick-red of the kitchen garden walls? While the palate revelled in them, the mignonette sown in the border at their feet took the happy nostrils by storm.

Freddy divided his time between sitting in the green Lady's Parlour with Anne, and strolling about with his tall Gwen's arm flung round his shoulders—the shoulders, that though he was a good-sized man, were on a distinctly lower level than hers. What was the subject of their conversation Miss Baskerville a little later incidentally mentioned to Hatton.

"I am afraid you will not get him to sit to you to-day, even for the few minutes that you say you need."

"Why not? He does not seem particularly busy."

"Oh, it is not that; it is that—he would not let mother suspect it for the world—but he is very much out of spirits to-day."

Hatton's eyes opened wider than to their always broadly expanded wont.

"Bless the man! what can he want more than he has got?" he asked in blunt wonder.

"He has been very unkindly treated by a friend."

"Oh, indeed! Well, of course, I am in the dark as to what he—the friend, I mean—has done; but it must be something pretty bad to put him out of conceit with this," drawing a long breath of enjoyment as his glance embraced the stately Paradise—stately for all its overgrown dishevelment—around him.

"It is not a *he!* It is a *she!*"

"Oh!"

"She wired to him yesterday to go to her—she is detained in London for some reason or other—and take her to the play; and when he got there she had gone off with somebody else, and not even left a message for him. He was dreadfully hurt. He has just been telling me about it."

There was a pause. Hatton had withdrawn his eyes from the prospect, and fixed them on the ground. It was ridiculous of him, considering the things he had seen and taken part in in his rough-and-tumble passage through life; but he was shocked.

"At all events, he did not tell your mother," he said presently in a lower key than usual.

"Not to-day, because he did not wish the smallest cloud to dim her brightness—she is so

absurdly sentimental, poor old darling!—but on any other day he would certainly have told her. He always says that nothing helps him so much as our sympathy. He always tells us *everything*."

This was not strictly true, as it was only the more innocent of his entanglements that the graceless Freddy confided to his wife and daughter, but that daughter—with all her wide-awakeness and up-to-dateness, she was not very perspicacious where she loved—firmly believed what she said.

"It is so *grossly* ungrateful of her!" continued Gwen, presently, as her auditor remained strictly silent. "He has heaped her with the most beautiful presents—far more than he could afford, and *this* is how she serves him!"

Hatton was not very easily moved to mirth; but at that he gave a short laugh. The good-hearted, righteous indignation with which the girl beside him denounced the wronger of her father struck him as at once ludicrous and shocking. But it was an article of his antiquated code never to say anything belittling of a parent to a child.

"It seems a topsy-turvy way of doing business," he said shortly.

His interlocutor either did not realize or—more probably—was jovially indifferent to his or any one else's disapprobation.

"Mother is a bit of a Philistine!" she said, "bless her! But even she must realize that if you

have married an exceptionally attractive man, you can't be such a dog-in-the-manger as to wish to keep him exclusively to yourself! The only way in which that antiquated institution can keep its footing at all is by leaving absolute liberty of selection both before and after to both sides!"

She ended complacently; and, though they had grown to be good comrades, there was all his old distaste for her ridiculous gospel in his angry eyes, as he said rudely—

"You talk more tommy-rot than any one I ever met!" and so got up and left her.

CHAPTER XVIII

He went along the terrace in search of Diego, who must have slipped away unmissed while Gwen was relating her father's disasters. A suspicion that the child might have returned to the forbidden joys of a pond, into which some askers had lately been imported to eat the weeds, quickened his steps. But before he reached his proposed goal, he came face to face with a sight which diverted him for a few minutes from his quest.

Along the broad terrace walk that ran before the Jacobean front of the house, in the full blaze of the afternoon sun—a blaze that seemed to blister even the stone vases and pagan gods that ornamented it, a bath-chair was slowly advancing. The inmate was protected from the glare by the raised hood of the vehicle and by a largely shading and eminently beautifying black hat, while out of the webby white of what an interviewer would have called a "priceless lace fichu," Mrs. Granard's face rose in smooth, cool sweetness. Altogether, with her hood and her neckerchief, she somehow gave

the impression of an arum lily rising from its pale sheath.

As he came up to it, the bath-chair, whose propeller was held by Mamma, stopped.

"We are on our way to my daughter Anne's garden—her very own garden. You have not seen it? Oh! it is the gem of the whole place. Will you not come with us?"

At first the employment of the plural pronouns puzzled him. Who were *we* and *us?* In a moment, and with a shock even greater than that which Gwen's indelicate sympathy with her parent's amours had caused him, he realized. From behind her mother's triumphal car a hot and weary figure raised itself from its butting attitude and stood tiredly erect. The face that crowned that form was painfully flushed even to the forehead; the hat was awry with the effort of pushing, and the breath came over-quickly through the half-parted lips.

Could this be the graceful smiling nymph who had stepped beside him so cheerfully over the green-sward to the squat church in the morning? Yes, it was Lucia—the normal Lucia—Lucia the hewer of wood and drawer of water!

"For God's sake, let me take your place!" he gasped, horrified out of any of his newly acquired rudiments of good manners by the shock of her aspect.

Lucia shook her head ; and her lips formed the —to her mother—inaudible answer.

"She would not like it."

But her champion was not to be so easily put off. "Mrs. Granard," he said, addressing the family deity in a shockingly hectoring voice, "you must really allow me to push you instead of your daughter. This chair is a great deal too heavy for her ; and in this weather it is quite enough to kill her ! "

Mamma often said how fond she was of a new sensation ; but there is no doubt that she did not find that one which the present occasion offered her altogether pleasurable. Hatton's speech combined an attack upon her maternal tenderness, and an infraction of habits which for years her family had held to be sacrosanct. Is it needless to add that she showed no slightest trace of her inward annoyance?

"That is what I am always telling her ! But though you would not think it to look at her, Lucia is a terrible tyrant ! Perhaps "—with a flattering small smile—"you will be able to keep her in better order than I ever can ! "

By the time that Anne's garden was reached, the disfiguring scarlet had partially retreated from the "tyrant's " forehead. Her hat was set straight, and though she was no longer a nymph, she had resumed the aspect of ordinary humanity.

Anne's garden was a strange and lovely jumble, where the pretty fancifulness that lurked in her

nature—a fancifulness not sympathized with by any member of her family except, perhaps, Freddy, when he had time to remember it—had full play. From her predecessors in that pleasant garden-close she had inherited a little eighteenth-century temple dedicated to friendship; and in the spring-time long-ago planted daffodils framed the name of a departed forerunner, about whom Anne sometimes sentimentally speculated. The sun-dial, too, with its motto, that might have been from Herrick, and the circular flower-bed copied from the rose window in the church, were bequests, as were the roses that had vanished from gardeners' catalogues—superseded sweetnesses, whose modest cups distilled the perfumes that scented Shakespeare's rose-haunted sonnets. But the little blue by-garden, where nothing that was not definitely azure, or sky-blue, or sea-blue, or sapphire-blue, might intrude; the borders dedicated to flowers with pretty or symbolic names; the picotees christened after friends;—were additions due to Anne's own heart and fancy. They were not much; but they gave her a great deal of pleasure.

When the bath-chair had been drawn within the covert of a honeysuckle bower that was flinging down its searching fragrance, and Lucia had sunk down on a turfy seat beside it, Hatton drew a breath of relief.

"Ah! that is better!" he said. "You look pretty comfortable *now!*"

"But I am *most* comfortable; and *too* grateful!" Mamma answered, with her invariably gracious acknowledgment of service.

The gratulation had not been intended for Mrs. Granard, but how—with her past record and that of her daughter—was she to know that? The utterer of the sentence had tact enough—though it was not a quality in which he was usually strong—not to correct the error; but he threw a queer dry look at Lucia, and thought or imagined he saw an answering flicker of amusement on her fagged face.

"I must be going to look after that little beggar of mine! Ten to one he has got into some mischief!" he said, and hurried off.

The two women whom he left behind were silent for a minute or two; then Mamma said—

"*How* good-natured he is! and how glad I am that he persuaded my Flower de Luce not to over-tire herself! I am sure that I am the last person who would wish to over-drive a willing horse!"

"I am sure you are!" the daughter said gratefully, and with a faint stab of compunction at the slightly different tinge that the incident had given to her own reflections. "You are always so right and sane in your judgments!" she said presently, with real conviction. "Because he is not very polished, I was grossly unjust to him!"

And then they were both silent again. There seemed no reason why—shut in with dense box

hedges, and with the only approach to their sanctuary formed by the old iron gate, through whose beautiful light tracery alone could any eye spy upon them—they might not have remained musing and drowsing till tea-time; but Fate decided otherwise. Mrs. Granard was asleep—she was far too sensible ever to deny it when this happened to her—and Lucia was drowned in parti-coloured meditations, when the sound of the gate suddenly flung open made them both spring back into wakeful consciousness.

The man who had lately left them beaming with satisfaction at the rescue he had accomplished was rushing back in distraught haste, his face convulsed by some violent emotions.

"Come at once!" he said in a hardly recognizable voice. "There is no time to lose! He is choking!"

As he spoke, Hatton had reached the two ladies, and seizing Lucia by the arm was pulling her up from her grassy seat.

"Who is choking? Who is it?" she asked, gasping with surprise at the suddenness of the onslaught; but he only repeated frantically—

"Come! *Come!* Come!"

In a moment she was speeding by his side over the turf towards an unknown goal, and with an object which was revealed to her only in hoarse fragments as they raced along at the top of their speed.

"*Diego!*—swallowed a horse-chestnut!—stuck in his throat!—fingers too big to get it out!"

He had never let go her arm since he had unceremoniously seized it in pulling her to her feet, and now, with no more consciousness of its being flesh and blood than is the drowning man of the fibre of the rope that hauls him out of the water, dragged her along by it to the spot where Diego was wildly running about, gasping and black in the face, with clenched hands and starting eye-balls.

In a second Lucia had flung herself on her knees on the grass beside him, seized him by the jaw, thrown his head back, and, opening his mouth as wide as it would go, plunged her finger and thumb into the orifice. Slender as both were, it was as much as they could do to get into the little mouth, and the difficulty was enhanced by the slipperiness of the chestnut. After a struggle, however, which, though it seemed to last an hour, really occupied only five seconds, she managed to get a grip of the obstacle, and with one determined tug plucked it out and threw it triumphantly on the grass. Then, to her own intense disgust, she burst into tears.

"It is all right!" she gasped angrily. "It was nothing really. Do not look like *that!*"

That was a Hatton she had never seen, a dead-white, dazed man, unable at once to realize his escape from a hideous peril, and who was clutching his

little rescued child with an almost wolfish hunger of love in his eyes.

"Is—he—really—all—right?" he asked indistinctly; and she saw that he was trembling all over.

"Yes, of course he is!" she answered with a ridiculous sympathetic break in her voice. "What on earth could have made him do it?"

"What made you do it, Diego? You know that you are a very wicked fellow?" the father asked with a poignant tenderness in his tone that contradicted the rebuking words.

Whether as the result of tone or words, Diego burst into bitter weeping; and burying his face in his parent's shoulder sobbed out a long and, to Lucia, perfectly unintelligible explanation of his crime. It was understood, however, by the person to whom it was addressed, and at the end of the cryptic narrative he gave a translation of it to the puzzled hearer.

"He says that he heard the Signora Gwen telling you about a man at the hospital who swallowed a corkscrew, and after thirty years it came out at his elbow; and he thought that if he swallowed a chestnut it might come out after thirty years at his elbow!"

Lucia laughed a little hysterically, but still with a relieved sense of relaxed tension.

"Well, I hope he will not try the experiment again," she said in a fairly steady voice.

But it was a relief when a diversion came in the shape of Gwen's high, gay tones ringing out—

"Why, what are you all crying about? What have they been doing to you, Diego? Come and tell me this minute!"

CHAPTER XIX

"WHAT you could have been thinking of," Mrs. Church said, in a key of horrified reproach, "to leave her there, without a word of explanation—leave her there, believing that some terrible calamity had happened, and, as far as I know, never to have troubled your head any further as to what had become of her?"

Her three sisters were standing in awful conclave round Miss Granard. Sarah was the spokeswoman; but the other two were only awaiting their turn. To the stupefaction of all three, Lucia took up her own indefensible defence.

"What *could* have become of her, sitting comfortably in the shade?"

"But she was *not* in the shade!" Anne broke in, her no longer pinky birthday face a-quiver with emotion. "The sun had got quite round, and was beating right down upon her dear head; as the hood of the chair had been lowered, she had absolutely *no* protection! To think that such a thing should have happened to her when she was under my roof!"

"You left her," Jane said severely—Jane was generally the justest of the three—"a prey to the most poignant anxiety; for all she knew, some frightful accident might have happened to any or all of us!"

"You left her there," resumed Mrs. Church, taking up again the leadership that was hers by right of seniority, "in this terrible state for Heaven knows how long, while you were taking your ease Heaven knows where!"

Lucia's not always patient eyes flashed, though they felt inclined to prick with tears.

"There was no particular *ease* in pulling a slippery horse-chestnut ball out of a choking child's throat, as you would find, if you tried it!"

"You could not have been an hour and a quarter pulling a slippery horse-chestnut ball out of a choking child's throat!" Mrs. Church retorted, with a not very successful attempt at judicial calm, and an exasperatingly accurate repetition of Lucia's words.

"No; I suppose not," the latter answered, drooping her head, the spurt of defensive fire gone out of her tear-dimmed eyes. "I suppose not, though it seemed as long!"

"What you were doing with yourself the rest of the time you best know!"

"She is not any the worse, I think?" Lucia said with a return to her meek drudge voice, and

an appealing glance from one to the other of the angry faces round her.

"It is no thanks to you if she is not!" Anne cried, with the unnecessary venom of an habitually gentle person indulging herself in the luxury of being in a rage. "And she would do all she could to prevent our knowing it if she was! She would not even allow us to blame you! She said, 'Do not find fault with her! She only lost her head! It is what we all do sometimes!'"

At this proof of Mamma's magnanimity, Lucia's tears broke forth frankly. She was not much given to weeping as a rule, but her nerves had not yet grown steadied after their recent shock.

"It showed a want of consideration on Mr. Hatton's part which, I confess, surprises me," Mrs. Swinderby said. "Why — knowing as he does the state of Mamma's health—he should have run such a risk, I cannot imagine! Why he should have applied to *you*, Lucia, who have never got on with him, instead of, say, to Gwen, with whom he is always hand-in-glove, I fail to comprehend!"

Lucia's tears stopped suddenly. "I was within reach, and Gwen was not," she replied steadily. "And when it is a case of saving his child's life, a man does not much mind even if the person who does it is personally repugnant to him!"

Her sisters were too little used to noticing the shades of expression in her voice to realize the latent

bitterness of her words. It was a shock to herself to find that the matter-of-fact assumption of how much higher Gwen stood than she did in the estimation of the one person whom she had fatuously credited with a preference for *herself*, gave her a stab of mortification. The interval between the extraction of Diego's chestnut and the revival of a sense of filial piety in Miss Granard's breast remained for ever unexplained to the irate sisterhood ; yet it was not unexplainable.

"You should not have scolded him!" Lucia had said reproachfully, and still panting, to Hatton, when they had been left alone after the drama which had reduced them both to blanched incoherence.

They were alone, because Gwen had taken advantage of their condition to carry Diego off to have the tears washed from his face, and be "comforted with flagons and supported with apples." She had whipped him up in her strong arms and borne him away, making no more of his puny seven years' weight than if he had been a doll.

"You should not have scolded him! Of course, he likes Gwen"—it was the first time that she had ever mentioned her niece by her Christian name to her present auditor—"better than he does me! She has always been much kinder to him than I have, and no doubt I *did* hurt him—'urt him 'orrid,' as he said, poor little fellow!"

She tried to laugh at this quoted specimen of

Diego's choice Cockney lately learned from the "lady who kept their lodgings."

"You *only* saved his life!" the man returned, and it seemed as if there his congested vocabulary brought him to a choking stop.

"Was that doing him a kindness?" she asked with a light cynicism that was really an effort to escape from the oppression of his eyes, and a result of a vague dread as to what form his uncultured gratitude might take when once it had broken down the dam of suffocated silence that held it in.

She did not mean him to answer her question, and went on at once in a voice that, to a casual listener, might have seemed as full of cold disapproval as most of her former utterances to him had been.

"You ought not to have scolded him! I can't think how you could have had the heart to scold him at such a moment, poor little motherless child!"

"Motherless!" he repeated, in a sort of stammering way, and with a look that frightened her—a look so full of strangeness and shock and pain. "Who—who says that he is motherless? How do you know that he is motherless?"

"I—I—do not!" she answered, stammering too. "I know—nothing about him. I—I—only thought that—being as he is so frail and little, if he had had a mother, she—she—would have been with him."

Hatton's head dropped a little forward on his chest, and it was a minute or two before he spoke.

"You were about right," he said. "It was a perfectly natural inference." Then, raising his head, as if in assertion that it was not shame that had bowed it, added steadily, "Diego's mother could not put up with us!"

CHAPTER XX

Mamma received quite an ovation when next she appeared in public, which was not till more than twenty-four hours after the occurrence of her catastrophe. Though she had put such a gallant front upon it, and tried to pretend she was none the worse for it, in order to palliate Lucia's enormity, there could be no doubt, alas! that it *had* told upon her.

She could not appear at dinner, though it *was* Anne's birthday, which "spoke for itself," as Anne said in a voice choked with indignation. Not only was she absent from the mutilated rites of festivity that celebrated Mrs. Baskerville's *fête*, but she had to be read to sleep by Lucia. In point of fact, Miss Granard read through most of the night, for though Mamma, thank God! fell asleep very soon, yet her daughter was afraid lest the cessation of sound might awaken her; and Mamma, of course, being asleep, could not arrest the progress of the weary voice. It arrested itself now and then; and Lucia dozed uneasily off, waking up with a start of unnecessary fright.

Mamma was dreadfully concerned in the morning, when she found what had happened; but, after all, vigils never hurt Lucia—at least, so they had all agreed long ago. The morning was wet, and Lucia spent it in writing letters for her mother; and the afternoon turned out very hot, and Mamma thought she would rather stay in her sitting-room than face the outside glare—poor darling! no wonder, after yesterday—and Lucia sat by her and fanned her. By this time Mrs. Granard was so much better and—*par parenthèse*—so cruelly bored by Anne's tiptoe assiduities, that she insisted on appearing. (Mamma was never one to make a fuss about herself, and had a horror of giving trouble to other people's servants.)

As has already been said, she received quite an ovation.

'Freddy ran to meet her with both arms wide open, and kissed her with the greatest tenderness, but also with the nicest care not to disarrange a curl of snowy hair or a fold of webby lace.

For one bad moment every one feared that Otto was about to follow suit; but he contented himself with a grip of his coarse hand, and one of his clumsy Teuton jokes, which even Sarah did not try to laugh at.

No one took any notice of Lucia, except her host, who gave her a rather covert and very gentle tap on the back to encourage her; and Hatton, who greeted

her with a glance of indignant gladness in his eyes, and asked in an audible voice why on earth she had thought it necessary to sit up all night, as he had been told was the case.

At his words, Lucia—a Flower de Luce that looked as if it had been a good deal battered by rain and wind—glanced round apprehensively; but Mamma was so wise that, though she was not in the least deaf, whatever she might say to the contrary, she never heard anything that it was discreeter not to hear; and Hatton's question was met by the ignominious silence it deserved.

The dinner was quite gay, Freddy keeping up a delightful fire of light jests with his neighbours, and even sending the shafts of his pleasant wit down the table to his wife and daughter. It was a wit that could never hurt anybody, and Mamma was always its best stimulator and fosterer. They kept the ball going between them, and at the other end of the board Bob Swinderby and Hatton, who neither of them cared about jokes, talked across Gwen—loudly protesting against their incivility—about wapitis and elands and gnus.

Lucia stole a look at one of the interlocutors every now and then. Could this man, opposite her, with his strong, cheerful face, and his apparently entire absorption in rifle and gun, be the same out of whose unwilling heart she herself had wrested its tragic story only yesterday? How monstrous it was

of her! How like Gwen! Never again would she be able to upbraid her niece with her indelicate forcings of reluctant confidences! When had Gwen ever done anything half so inexcusable as this? "Not been able to put up with them!" How oddly he had worded it! Why had Diego's mother not been able to put up with them? Less than a week ago the answer would have seemed patent to her. Because Hatton was, and must always have been, *unput-up-able* with! The explanation seemed somehow less satisfying now. "Diego's mother!" He had spoken of her as "Diego's mother," not as "my wife." Perhaps she was not—had never been his wife! Perhaps she was some one else's wife!"

Miss Granard's speculations beginning thus to branch widely, were here interrupted by the voice of Otto.

Mr. Church always believed that if people did not laugh at his jokes, it must be because they had not heard them. He had therefore a habit of repeating them in a louder key. He was now giving a repetition of his witticism about Mamma. It turned upon the distressing fact that, in her condition of helpless anxiety under Lucia's desertion, Mrs. Granard had actually managed to get out of her bath-chair, and been met by Anne halfway to the garden gate; and was to the effect that his mother-in-law had become such an acrobat that he

fully expected soon to see her performing on a *trapèze* at the Hippodrome.

The subject was a dreadfully sore one to all Mamma's daughters, and the cumbrous pleasantry was received in a silence yet more complete than that which had greeted its first appearance. Even Reuben Silbermein, occupied as was his attention by complete satisfaction with Zillah, and as complete dissatisfaction with the *ménu*, was made enough aware of the strained situation to observe, *sotto voce*, to his betrothed, that he wished her father would not indulge in "*b*leasantries."

Zillah smiled a languid but sincere assent. No one could think her father less amusing than she did; but then she never found any one amusing nowadays!

In the drawing-room after dinner the married daughters clustered closer than ever around Mamma. Apart from the feeling of having to make up to themselves for the time wasted by her seclusion, there was a general sense of ireful loyalty—a sense that she needed indemnification for the insult done her by Otto's hateful joke. This was, of course, strongest in Sarah, on whom, in a manner, the disgrace of its perpetration was reflected, and her sisters had the justice to yield to her the *pas* in reverential demonstrations of tenderness. Amongst them there was certainly no room for Lucia, and she stole unobserved out of the pastel drawing-room

—a lovely room decorated, garlanded, love-knotted, by French artists of the eighteenth century—into the large moonlight outside. It was, indeed, like "the daylight sick," or indeed scarcely sick, so royally did

> "... she that never sleeps,
> But walks about high heaven all the night,"

hold her starry court in the sky.

Lucia had not been out all day, owing to her close attendance upon Mamma. Thanks to her vigil, her disgrace, and to a sense of excitement whose origin was not traceable to either of these causes, she felt feverish, and the velvet air, handling her fagged cheeks and putting its airy fingers through her locks, was sweet to her. It was sweet in a double sense, for Anne always had the best-smelling flowers set nearest the house, no matter if they were not very effective, or flaunting, or new.

Mrs. Baskerville often said that she was thankful for the age, cheapness, and general badness of her head gardener, as she could thereby have her own way in the matter of her heresies and her fancies. The gardener at Baskerville *never* took a prize. From its gates there never were carried to neighbouring Shows Dutch-cheese-sized roses nor cart-wheel chrysanthemums; but, on the other hand, nowhere in the countryside were there to be smelt such acres of poignant perfume.

Presently Lucia found herself passing out of the

moonlight into a long straight shadowed walk, with a storied urn at the end, at whose marble rams' heads and naked wrestlers the moon had shot an illuminating shaft through the tree-branches. Without her volition, her feet were carrying her to the scene of yesterday's drama.

Here was the horse-chestnut whose fatal fruit had so nearly cut Diego's life-thread; this was the spot on which she had stood when she made her unpardonable speech; and this the one on which he had told her that Diego's mother could not put up with them! Would she—Lucia—ever know why? It was most unlikely—most unlikely that he should ever wish to reopen a subject that brought such a look into his face.

And after all, why should she care to know? why have any curiosity about the domestic affairs of a bounder, to be merely looked at by whom she had felt a degradation, and whose suspected interest in herself—unjustly suspected, as it now appeared—had made her blood boil? Was not the only motive that had ever made her stoop to converse with him the passionate desire to obtain from him, since no other channel was available, information about the fate of another person? *Another person!—Carruthers!* Was it possible that since her arrival she had had ample opportunities for making those inquiries which she had schemed through long wakeful nights how to put, and that she had clean forgotten to do so?

Was it conceivable that the interest in the doubtlessly sordid matrimonial or pseudo-matrimonial troubles of a boorish outsider had driven from heart and memory the destiny of her own one love? If not, why was she standing moonstruck here? What special interest had the spot?

Stung by the thought, she walked quickly on. A few steps brought her to a stone bench, upon which a little white figure was sitting. The dejection of its attitude was as apparent as the bareness of its neck and arms in the gleam of the strong night-shining.

"Are not you rather rash?" Lucia asked, pausing before it. "I mean not having any wrap? There is a very heavy dew."

Zillah swept her draperies aside with a gesture of rather passive friendliness, and made room for her aunt beside her.

"You have none yourself," she answered.

"Oh, but *I* do not count!"

This proposition was so self-evident, that it never occurred to Lucia's niece to attempt to refute it.

CHAPTER XXI

"WELL," said Lucia, after a moment's silence, "is it as much worse here than it was in London, as you feared?"

The response from the figure beside her was a shiver, for which the night-dews were not responsible. After a pause, it added in explanation—

"It was much easier to get away from him in London."

"I suppose so."

"It is not easy here," the little plaining voice went on. "And nobody helps me, nobody takes him off my hands!"

This attitude towards a *fiancé* might have shocked an ordinary aunt, but Miss Granard was acclimatized to her nieces. There was no outraged decorum in her voice, only intense pity, as she said—

"You poor soul! how can any of us—any one help you?"

"Oh, not really, of course; but they might take him off my hands now and then! Gwen might pretend that she wanted him to go out in her cart with her. Father might persuade him to go to the

City with him. But no! not one of them ever gives me a helping hand!"

To the ordinary hearer there would have been something ludicrous in this indictment, but neither speaker nor auditor was conscious of any mixture of such an element.

"I suppose," Lucia said, "that your parents at least think that you like his company?"

But at that Zillah's soft accents took on a vehemence foreign to them.

"They do not think it! They could not think it! Who *could* like his company?"

Miss Granard was silent. She could neither proclaim herself a relisher of Reuben Silbermein's society, nor suggest any one else as occupying that post. She could only listen to the troubled flow of her wretched little companion's speech, and hope that the utterance of her disgust at her future husband gave her at least some relief.

"He is always trying to hunt me into corners, to persuade me into sitting in the Lady's Parlour with him. You know that there is scarcely room for two in it! I hold out as long as I can, but sometimes, at last, out of sheer weariness, I give in; but oh! how sorry I am when I do!"

If it had not been a stone bench, it would have been shaken by the shudder that accompanied this statement of the effect produced by a financier's tenderness in a leafy bower!

Lucia heaved a great sigh. Certainly, under some aspects, life was a grubby sort of business, even with such a moon to look down upon it, and such a tender breeze to carry its mean whispers of ignoble pain. Miss Granard seldom advised and still more rarely reproached her nieces, so it was only very tentatively that she now said—

"You do not think that it would be possible to tell him the truth, even now? to give him the opportunity of letting you off?"

But at the fatuity of such a proposition Zillah gave a little angry cry—

"How can you talk such nonsense? Ask him to let me off, when he has paid up—paid every farthing?"

There was another impotent silence.

"And—*Jack!*"

The answer came angrily again, but delayed by tears.

"What is the use of bringing *him* in? He is not helping me either; he is not behaving well—not as he promised to do. He seemed to think it all right at first, and that we should see each other oftener, and more comfortably *afterwards;* but now he is quite off his head, and threatening to blow his brains out! I wish, while he was about it, he would blow mine out, too!"

It was a desperate aspiration for so small a pipe to utter, and, had it been pitched in a slightly

higher key, might have at once changed the current of Miss Church's destiny; for a moment later a thick, unEnglish voice was apostrophizing her as its "Schatz;" and demonstrating, by placing a remonstrating hand upon it—the dew-dampness of her bare white shoulder.

At the advent of Zillah's purchaser, Lucia reluctantly rose, ignoring the despairing clutch of her niece's hand. She could do that niece no good by staying *en trio* with her, since Reuben's love-making resembled that of the trippers at Hampton Court, about whom a witty resident of that place observed, in reference to their pronounced preference for the more public walks, that "Of course, there was no pleasure in kissing unless you were *seen!*"

As Lucia slowly retraced her steps across the moon-patterned sward, she saw, as she neared the horse-chestnut under which she had paused earlier, that a man was standing beneath its shade.

"You have come here, too!" he said, with an accent and expression of brusque and startled pleasure.

The implication was plain that the same motive had driven them there. The long habit of snubbing him brought a denial to her lips; but it did not pass their portal. After all, it was true. So she answered only—

"Yes."

He had emerged from the shade; and they stood together on the dewy grass of the long ride. Only an odd-voiced night-bird broke the stillness for a space.

"Why did you sit up all night?" he asked suddenly.

She had expected some reference to their joint drama of yesterday, and the question took her by surprise.

"Have I to account to you for my actions?" she asked; but there was, or he fancied it, a slight quiver in her voice that belied the severity of her speech.

"I am afraid not; but all the same I shall remonstrate," he rejoined doggedly.

"*Remonstrate!* With whom?"

"With your mother."

At that she stiffened really. "By what right?" she asked, and he saw her white throat elongating itself in angry dignity.

But to-night he was not to be so easily quelled as he had been in the earlier days of their acquaintance.

"By what right?" he repeated. "By the right of being the only human being who ever seems to perceive that you are working yourself to death!"

She laughed a little scornfully. "Working myself to death! I am a good while about it."

"What is your life?" he asked, pouring out his words quickly, as if they had long been restrained,

and it was a relief for once to let them go. "Sitting up all night—pushing bath-chairs much too heavy for you, with the thermometer at 80° in the shade all day—being the nigger-slave of a perfectly healthy, strong, self-indul——"

"Stop!" she said, with white authority. "If you speak one word more in such a strain about my mother, our acquaintance ends!"

His curly bullet head dropped forward a little on his breast.

"Yes," he said, after a moment's struggle, "you are right! She is your mother. But if you knew what it is to stand by and see, and not be able to move a finger to——"

"And what business is it of yours?" she asked the more crushingly because a traitor in her breast was giving a dastard approbation to his impious words. "What right have you to protest, if I happen to be old-fashioned enough to love my mother, and wish to do what I can to soothe her declining——?"

She stopped abruptly; that traitor within the gates had got the upper hand, and was clamouring in her mental ear that she was talking bunkum; that Mamma was not declining—would never decline!

Hatton's eyes were resting on the grass at his feet; and his lips were pinched together in the evident determination to take his punishment meekly. At the break in her speech he looked up in

surprise. Not for one instant did he guess the cause of that unfinished sentence.

"*Do not stop!*" he said in a rather husky voice. "Go on! You are quite right! I have put myself completely in the wrong! But all my life I have been like that! I have never seen a chap down without wanting to pick him up! As often as not he has not thanked me."

At that she could not help laughing a little. "Am I a *chap?*" she asked derisively, but with a slight gentling of her awful avenging-angel manner. Then with a still further unbending, "Come," she said, "we will not quarrel. If you ought to apologize to me, as you undoubtedly should, *I* ought still more to apologize to *you*."

His always wide-open eyes stared blue and full at her in the moonlight.

"*You* to me! What for?"

It was her turn to droop head and sink eyes. "For my unpardonable speech yesterday about—Diego."

The words came very slowly, and the voice fell towards the end; but there was no doubt that he had heard. She was aware of a drawing in of his breath, before he said, after a very little delay—

"I do not see why they were unpardonable."

Then there was a silence, only jarred upon by a guttural sound of amorous remonstrance from Reuben in the near distance.

Hatton broke it. "Do you care to hear?" he asked; and there was a rough diffidence in his voice. "You have snubbed me so to-night—you were quite right—that I do not feel as if you *could* care or trouble your head about anything that concerns me!"

"I should like to hear," she replied slowly and softly—"if it does not give you too much pain to tell me."

"Pooh!" he said scornfully; "a little pain more or less, what does that matter?" Yet despite his brave words, it appeared somewhat difficult to get under way; but at last, "It was like this"—he began, seeming as if he found it easier to rush *in medias res* at once. "She was above me—a good bit above me—as much above me as——"

He stopped precipitately. Both knew that he was going to say "as *you;*" and both were thankful that he had not.

"It was at 'Frisco. She belonged to one of the old Spanish families, as proud as Lucifer, as poor as Job."

Lucia had been listening with an unmistakable interest, which might have allayed her companion's misgivings; but at the last clause a flash of the old disgust sprang into her eyes. "What execrable taste! Why need he have alluded to the poor woman's poverty?" But Hatton's next sentence revealed how important a bearing on his story that poverty had.

"Her father died suddenly, and left her penniless. It was a choice between me and starvation! She chose *me!*" The narration was evidently beginning to be more difficult. The last sentences shot out with brusque brevity. The next one or two came somewhat more easily. "I did not know at the time that it came to *that*. I thought she liked me. I did not see any reason then, and I do not now, why she or any woman should not like me!"

A tinge of the old self-satisfaction had come into his voice. In the moonlight she saw him throw up his head defiantly.

"For God's sake, do not begin to boast!" she said almost under her breath.

"No!"—he said—"no! I will not. As you will see, I had not much cause for bragging in *this* case."

"Well?"

"At first it was all right; or at least pretty fair. At all events, I thought so. I have never been one to look ahead for misfortunes; and I suppose I took it for granted that she was fond of me; and I made up my mind when Diego came that it would be better still. But it was not; she never took to the poor little chap! I suppose that's why he and I have always been such pals! I am like that! If a fellow is down——"

"You are going to boast again!"

For the first time in the course of their acquaintance he did not hear her. His mind was travelling down the track of memory.

"I expect you guess what is coming. She liked some one else; had done all along; they had been children together. At the time of her father's death he was away in Europe; but he came back, and——"

"She went away with him."

He was looking at her with the perfect directness of his broad blue eyes, which had no anger and not very much pain in them.

"No," he answered, "she did not go away with him. But—there was no doubt about it—I found it out one day; and we settled it then and there."

It was Lucia's turn to draw in her breath. "You shot him?"

"No, I didn't! Why? Well, I thought I had done her a bad turn enough already by marrying her, poor little woman! so I fired in the air. What good would it have done any one if I had put a bullet through him?"

"So you didn't?" in a key of astonished relief.

"No; it was the other way up. He put a bullet through me! The doctors said it was the nearest thing they ever saw. If it had gone the hundredth part of an inch more to the left, it must have gone through the heart! I am precious glad it did not!" he ended heartily.

There was no doubt about the sincerity of the thanksgiving; but once again Miss Granard felt a shock. The orthodox aspiration would undoubtedly have been, "Would God that he had!"

"You felt differently at the time, of course?" she said, anxious to give him a loophole of escape.

But he would not avail himself of it. "No; I did not. I was always determined to pull through. The doctors said that was what helped me more than anything. What would have become of Diego if I had gone under?"

"Ah, yes! that was your reason, of course?" She sighed with an unaccountable sense of relief.

"It was *partly* the reason," he rejoined with—if he had known it—a somewhat injudicious truthfulness. "After the first, I was not so very unhappy. I had nothing to reproach myself with; and after all, poor little woman! I had not married her for *love*. If I had not married her, she must have starved, or worse. And I am like that! I——"

It was sadly to be feared that Mr. Hatton was about once more to apply his own trumpet to his lips, when an interruption occurred. It came in the form of Zillah, who, nymphlike flying from her attendant satyr, cried out to her aunt in passing—

"Do not you hear them? They are calling for you all over the place!"

For a moment Lucia stood paralyzed. How

entirely she had forgotten Mamma and her bed-time! What outrageous hour was that which was striking from the stable clock?

"Mamma wants me!" she gasped; and, with the consecrated formula on her lips, fled.

CHAPTER XXII

Despite its ill-omened opening, there was no doubt that Mamma's visit was this year going off beautifully.

At first, indeed, Anne had said that she was afraid she never could feel quite the same to Lucia again; but Mamma had gently chidden her, and repeated her wise axiom, that "everybody lost his or her head sometimes," adding, generously, that Lucia did it seldomer than most people. So Miss Granard's iniquity was wiped off the slate of the family memory sooner than she had dared to hope, and the sun, literal and figurative, shone upon Mrs. Granard's *villégiatura*.

There were more elements of variety about it than had been the case in many former visits. Hatton was still "crisp," and seemed bidding fair to remain so, though he had taken Mamma to task most improperly for keeping Lucia out of bed that first night; but she had only given one of her delightful laughs—no one's laugh was at once so soft and so hearty as Mamma's—and had told him that it made her feel quite young again to be

scolded. And even poor Zillah's engagement—such was Mrs. Granard's power of extracting good out of evil—seemed to cause her unclouded satisfaction.

She was warmly interested in the letters of congratulation received by Sarah, and invariably exhibited by the latter as triumphant evidence of the wisdom of her choice of a son-in-law; and took as keen a pleasure in the presents that congested the parcel post as if they had been offered to herself.

"*How* can any one pretend that the world has not improved?" she asked with a sunny smile one morning, after a larger than usual delivery of costly objects. "When I married I was given only two or three Church services in cases, half a dozen ormolu inkstands, and a little hideous jewellery; and I was not worse treated than my contemporaries. And look at this!" As she spoke she gazed admiringly at an exquisite eighteenth-century necklace—one of the many hundreds supposed to have inhabited Marie Antoinette's *écrin*—as it dangled from her forefinger and flashed in the morning beams.

But this was the one subject on which three of her children dared to differ from Mrs. Granard, and there was no great alacrity of acquiescence in her song of triumph, though all were present. On only the previous day they had discussed the subject in a somewhat Archibald Bell-the-Cat spirit.

"She lives in such a beautiful world of her own,"

Mrs. Baskerville had said, using for the first time in her life a half-apologetic tone in speaking of her mother, "that I think she sees all sorts of common things and people through a glorified mist with halos round their heads."

This explanation had no great success.

"And yet she has such admirable common sense," Mrs. Swinderby said. "I know no one with so sure an instinct, such a power of putting her finger on exactly the right spot in any difficult question, as she."

"She is very optimistic," Lucia hazarded diffidently; "she believes that it will turn out all right, because she wishes it."

"It seems almost a pity to undeceive her," Anne said sadly; "but *some one* ought to open her eyes."

There was a silence; clearly no one jumped at the office of enlightener of Mamma's blissful darkness.

"What do *you* say, Jane, to giving her a hint?" Mrs. Baskerville suggested at last, but with hesitation. "She thinks that you are much the cleverest of us, as you undoubtedly are, and she always attaches importance to your opinion."

But the proposal, though sugared by a compliment, was precipitately rejected by Mrs. Swinderby.

"It would come much better from Lucia. She is always with Mamma, and could choose her moment judiciously."

Miss Granard shook her head decisively. "I shall do more harm than good. She is much too kind and courteous to show it, but Mamma has a just contempt for my understanding!"

Nobody contradicted this assertion; and it ended in Anne, whose diplomatic efforts were never crowned with much success, being chosen to make a halting attempt to effect the desired result.

"Do you think that Zillah looks very happy?" Mrs. Baskerville asked one morning, when she had succeeded in capturing one of those *tête-à-têtes* with her mother which—though always to that mother's warmly expressed regret—were so difficult to manœuvre.

Mrs. Granard opened her sunny eyes almost as widely as Hatton could have done his.

"Happy!" she repeated. "Of course! Why not?"

"Well, Reuben is not very *appétissant*, is he? And we all know that there was somebody else. And it is not only *my* opinion; we *all* think that she looks broken-hearted!" Anne went on blunderingly.

It was a difficult position into which the daughter had clumsily plunged her mother. But *how* well Mamma got out of it!

"Broken-hearted!" she repeated with an air of lenient incredulity. "Dear Anne! how like you, and how sweet of you, to be making yourself unhappy over the possibility of any one you care

for not having their heart's desire! But you must not be unreasonable, and expect everybody's husband to be as attractive as *yours!* We must not measure ordinary mortals by *his* standard!"

The compliment brought, as Mrs. Granard knew it would, a dawning smile upon her daughter's lined and anxious visage. She hastened to make the dawn broad day by a subtly calculated question.

"By the way, when is *the* portrait to be begun? I *do* look forward to that!"

The smile spread further over Mrs. Baskerville's face, yet there was a cloudlet on her forehead.

"It might have been to-day; Mr. Hatton is quite willing to begin it before Zillah's is finished; as, of course, he can't always get her to sit when he wants her—Reuben is so dreadfully exacting. But as ill luck will have it, the *business* which took Freddy up to London yesterday will keep him there till the last train to-night. I have just had a wire from him to say so. He is doubly sorry, because it makes him miss some of your visit."

Mamma's dimple at this manifested itself in a smile of apparent faith and undoubted affection.

"How darling of him! and how extravagant to say so by telegram!"

Internally Mrs. Granard drew a long breath. The danger was past—the danger of Anne seizing her hand and adjuring her with tears to rescue Zillah. Mamma had not the slightest wish that

Zillah should be rescued, and she *never* interfered with her children's affairs. But it would be disagreeable to have to refuse; and Anne, when she was moist and hysterical, was very boring.

But *was* the danger quite averted? After a minute or two Mrs. Baskerville give signs of returning to the charge.

"Have you seen Zillah's portrait yet?" she asked. "Of course, it is unfinished, and Mr. Hatton did not want me to look at it; but I took just a peep when he was out of the room. It is *very* like her, as far as I could judge. But oh! she *does* look so sad!"

If there was a slight movement of impatience in Mrs. Granard's *for intérieur*, it did not rise to her smooth surface. With her statesmanlike deafness, she made as though the last clause of Anne's speech had been non-existent.

"Our dear Mr. Hatton is such a tyrant," she said, "that he will not allow me even a glimpse. It was very naughty of you to steal a march upon him and peep! He will not even allow any third person to be present at the sittings. When some one suggested that it would make Zillah more animated, if she had some one to amuse her, he said in his droll, quick way, 'I do not want her to look animated. It would not be she, if she looked animated.' That showed, didn't it, how perfectly he understood the character of her beauty? With

all his roughness, he has a wonderful *flair*, hasn't he? But I fully expect that it will be *Freddy* who will make his fortune!"

With this last masterly return to a subject whose fascination never failed to lure Freddy's wife away from any other path that she might be treading, Mrs. Granard finally succeeded in her object, and Anne went off at score. When, half an hour later, a beneficent household providence called her unwillingly away, her parent put out her hand towards the bottle of sal-volatile that always stood on the little Louis Seize stand at her elbow.

"How much more difficult to shake off Anne is than any of the others! There is something very gnat-like about her, dear thing!"

CHAPTER XXIII

"What an extraordinary coincidence!" Gwen said. "You have not seen it?" As she spoke she held out to Hatton the advertisement sheet of the *Times*, underlining with her forefinger the passage to which she wished to direct his attention.

He took it and read, "If Thomas Dalrymple Carruthers, who left England for America in 189—, and was last heard of as a tide-waiter at Sydney, in 190—, will apply to Messrs. Hawke & Mullins, 109, Pump Court, Temple, London, he will hear of something greatly to his advantage."

"It must be *he!*" she cried. "I know that his initials were T. D., for I saw them in a book of hers the other day. Poor soul! It was a little sixpenny paper thing—not worth sending back, I suppose—but she has kept it all these years!"

Hatton was silent, apparently re-reading the advertisement.

"It must be he!" the girl repeated. "Not only the name, but the date coincide!—189—. That was the very year he left England. I know that it was fourteen years ago."

Still her companion was silent.

"A *tide-waiter!*" she said, reading familiarly over his shoulder. "What on earth *is* a *tide-waiter!* He certainly has had a nice variety of occupations!"

At that Hatton spoke; but there was something odd about the tone of his voice.

"Of course, he had to take anything that turned up, poor devil! Beggars can't be choosers!"

"But he is not a beggar any longer!" she cried, her slitty eyes dancing with mirth and benevolence. "He has evidently come in for a fortune! I do not suppose that a *tide-waiter* is likely to take the *Times!* But some one is sure to tell him of this, and he will come racing home; and then you will capture him, and bring him down here, and he and Lucia will sit together in the Lady's Parlour—where, as poor Zillah is always complaining, there is barely room for two. And it will be just like the end of an early Victorian novel; for I suppose, poor dear silly things! they will not be content with anything but marriage!"

"What else would you expect them to be content with?" he asked with an anger that seemed disproportionate to the flighty folly of the utterance that provoked it, and to the style of which he ought certainly to have become accustomed by now.

But to that she made no answer. Instead, she was off again at a tangent.

"Supposing that he is still at Sydney—by-the-by, that was only last year, later than our latest news of him—how long will it be before he can get to England? Of course, now I come to think of it, Granny will have gone back to London long before. Well, poor Lucia's Black Hole will be lit up very effectually *this* winter, won't it?"

She put the question with a note of triumph; but there was no triumph in his answering look. In fact, his eyes did not meet hers, and his brows were gathered as if in painful perplexity. Gwen was never very observant when possessed of an *idée fixe* or hobby of her own; and she continued not noticing his lack of sympathy.

"Of course, you must put yourself at once into communication with these lawyers—what are their names?—Hawke & Mullins. It will be better that you should go up and interview them personally, and ask them to let us know at once, when they get the answer. How soon can that be?"

She began to reckon on her fingers, like a child. In her excitement, she had run out to join him on the terrace, hat- and jacketless; and the August beams were raining down on her red fleece, as on the scarlet geraniums that, billowing over a Greek vase beside her, scarcely surpassed it in warmth of colour.

"You will get a sunstroke," he said drily.

"That would be a pity, just as I am on the eve

of the accomplishment of my great work," she said, bubbling again with excited laughter. "Well, then, come into the shade, and let us talk. You are not half as much pleased as I expected!"

It was not till they had crossed a stretch of fine sward, still wet and glistening with globes of dew, and reached the leafy covert of a lime walk, that Hatton spoke.

"I do not like it!" he said. "I have never half liked it; and if I had known it would ever have come to this, I would never have gone in for it!"

"What!" she cried, standing stock still, in horrified incredulity. "You mean to say that you have never been in earnest all along? that you have never really wished to give her back her happiness, or what she fancies would be her happiness, poor soul? You have been trying to find him only because you felt sure you would never succeed?"

His eyes were on the gravel walk at his feet, following the shadows of the broad leaves as they slid and shifted in the tender breeze.

"Well," he said, "I suppose that it comes to about that."

"I did not think you were such a fraud!" she said, anger lowering the pitch of her usually penetrating high voice, and recoiling from him a pace or two.

There was a disagreeable silence.

"I do not think that we ought to go a step further without consulting *her*," Hatton said at last in a rather bull-dog voice.

"Consulting her!" repeated Gwen, eyes and tone alike expressing her scorn of the proposition. "You made that suggestion long ago at the beginning, and I thought that I had sufficiently demonstrated to you its futility. Consult Lucia as to whether we should bring her lover back to her? She might crawl into her Black Hole and die of grief for his loss; but she would never stir a finger to recover him!"

Hatton had lifted his eyes, and was regarding his companion sceptically.

"She has not died," he returned.

As this could not be denied, Miss Baskerville, after a minute or two, betook herself to rhetoric.

"Well," she said, flashing down green fire at him from her prodigious height, "I could not have believed it of you! I thought you were as keen about it as I—that you had a chivalrous wish to rescue her from her present wretched state, for it *is* a wretched state, though we all find it convenient to pretend that it is a privilege to be Granny's doormat!"

The end of the sentence was undoubted bathos, but Hatton was not aware of it.

"I *do* wish it!" he said; and his companion could not doubt his sincerity.

"Then why this change of tune?"

He did not immediately answer, and she repeated her question in a more impatient key.

"Do you suppose," he said at last, fixing her with the intensity of his dogged blue eyes, "that Carruthers, as he is now, has much resemblance to the boy she parted from fourteen years ago?"

"No doubt his sufferings and privations have told upon him; but you do not suppose that that would alienate her from him!" she answered.

"You do not quite grasp what they have been," he said.

"I know that he has actually wanted bread, and that he has had to turn his hand to a hundred things that we in our silly hyper-civilization consider derogatory!"

Hatton shook his head. "It is not that. I have done all that, and more, and no one can say that it has made me the least less fit to be liked and respected by man or woman!"

His head went up, as it always did when he was asserting his own merits.

Gwen's robust good nature had always accepted without wincing his tendency to self-approbation. She did not snub him now.

"I am sure it has not," she acquiesced.

"I am the last person to kick a fellow when he is down. But if ever I saw a poor chap on the downward grade it was Carruthers, and nothing

that I have heard since I last saw him seems to point to his being on the upward incline."

"Then why," she asked, with sounder logic than generally characterized her speech, "did you ever come into my plan for getting him back?"

"Because you bothered me into it," he replied, with more candour than courtesy. "I thought it was a moonshiny scheme that would never come to anything, and I suppose"—more hesitatingly, and with no vestige of brag left in his voice—"that I liked the idea that I was working for——" He broke off, as if he had gone further than he intended.

But he need not have been alarmed. Miss Baskerville was too much absorbed by her disappointment at his attitude towards her scheme and its new development to trouble her head about his motives.

"And I thought you would be as elated as I!" she said in a very crestfallen voice, her eye once more running over the advertisement—"'Something greatly to his advantage.' There is no doubt that he has come into a fortune," her tone reasserting its hopefulness. "Even if he *has* grown a little unkempt and rough, he may easily be polished up again! We need not show him until he is cleaned up and made presentable."

Her sanguineness was apparently not infectious.

"I do not think we ought to go any further in the matter without her consent."

His companion uttered a sound of extreme impatience.

"And knock the whole thing on the head at once?"

They had reached the portal of one of the Temples of Friendship, standing cool and lichened in what in the day of its erection would have been called a "grove."

"Come," she said, "let us sit down and thresh it out!"

He complied silently, and they sat side by side on the semicircular stone bench that ran round the interior, she, in her impulsive eagerness of persuasion, taking her place quite close to him, and turning all her long body and lit face fully towards him in a manner that might have led any chance passer-by—even if not of a suspicious turn of mind—to very erroneous conclusions.

"Now," she said, in a determined voice, "let us have it out! This is how it stands. We both know that she is wretchedly unhappy?"

"Yes."

"We both want her to be happy?"

"Yes."

"We have both been struggling for weeks to attain that object?"

He made a sort of rebellious movement with his shoulders.

"I suppose so."

"And now, by a *most* unexpected and unprecedented stroke of luck, we see ourselves within sight of our goal, we are to give the whole thing up? Is that it?"

He was silent for a while, only a painful contraction of feature, and a restless movement of hands, betraying his emotion.

"If it *was* for her happiness," he began presently; "if, when we have succeeded in bringing him back to her, he turns out to be fit for her—as fit, that is, as any one——"

"Pooh!" she interrupted. "Fit! What does that matter? In point of fact, which of *you* is ever fit for which of *us?* We move on a higher, purer plane." It was the measure of his dejection that he let this last assertion pass uncontested. "Let us face the worst," she went on, as he showed no sign of making a rejoinder. "He is probably very colonial. Well, so are you; but we none of us like you any the worse. He may, perhaps, have got into the habit of being rather thirstier than is quite desirable. I believe that people in the Colonies always do. But if he is fond of her, she can easily cure him of that."

"*Can* she?"

"At all events, she will enjoy trying to do so, more than she does pushing Granny in a bath-chair in the Dog Days," Gwen said, breaking out into her irrepressible levity.

But he gave her a look that arrested even her.

"You are talking of what you know nothing about," he said harshly.

She took this rebuff with her usual invulnerable good humour, so absorbed, in point of fact, in the eagerness of her desire to overcome his objections, that she was hardly aware of it, and being never troubled with that least desirable of assets—a thin skin.

"There can at least be no objection," she urged, "to your communicating with these lawyers on your own account, asking them as a favour to *you* to let you know if he gives any sign of life—a favour to you as an old friend of his."

"An old friend!" he repeated. "Well, he never was that. I did what I could for him, but not more than I would have done for any other chap that was in such low water I——"

"Oh yes! I know," she broke in rather precipitately, "you have always been so good in that way—helping lame dogs over stiles, and that kind of thing! But, even if he were not exactly a friend, you feel enough interest in him to be glad that he has come in for this piece of good luck, and to wish to know whether he is alive to enjoy it?"

In the eagerness of her pleading she had laid her hand quite unconsciously on his coat-sleeve, and her eyes, full of impatient fire, were demanding to meet and find acquiescence in his.

"There will not be the slightest danger of compromising *her*," Gwen went on, with growing urgency, as her waves of eloquence broke against the rock of his muteness. "Her name, of course, will never be mentioned. She will know nothing, *nothing* about it, until one fine day"—her eyes began to dance rollickingly—"good-bye to bath-chairs. Granny will have to find some one else to butt behind hers."

CHAPTER XXIV

Mrs. Baskerville had been afraid that her mother would never be able to bring herself to revisit Anne's own garden, after the terrible hardships to which she had been exposed in it; but Mamma was not like that. Probably divining her daughter's fear, she particularly asked to be propelled thither one day after tea.

No one could have guessed that she had any but pleasant associations with the spot, as she sat with a large fan in her hand to wave away the midges, surrounded by her children, and remarking every new flower that had blossomed in Anne's blue border since her last visit.

Anne alone was not present to be gratified by her mother's nice appreciation of every detail of her hobby. A higher duty had called her away, and she was pacing up and down a shady alley, with her arm through Freddy's, trying to console him for his latest lady love's last infidelity, about which he was very touchingly telling her.

Granny regretted the absentee; not that she was

very fond of Anne's conversation, but because a lifelong experience had taught her that when only three of her progeny were in *séance*, they were apt to fix upon some point in the conduct of the fourth, to remonstrate about which they brought their blended efforts of persuasion upon their parent. The present occasion was no exception to the rule.

"Poor Anne is really too silly!" Jane said, "mooning about with her head full of symbolical flowers and garlands of friendship, and never seeing what is under her nose; and then, of course, she gets shocks such as the one she had this morning!"

The allusion was to an announcement made by the absent and most emancipated of Mrs. Baskerville's two daughters, who had not been able to join the yearly gathering of her kin through stress of professional work, that she had accepted an Inspectorship of Nuisances at Swansea.

Mrs. Swinderby was feeling rather cross, not on account of her niece's social lapse, but because she had been detected sitting with Diego on her knee, telling him a story, and thereby imperilling her reputation as a sensible woman who had not any children because she could not be bothered with them! Although she had laboriously explained that it was only in her own interest that she had fondled the child, to still his tiresome plaint because

his father had gone to London without him, yet she took in, and knew that she took in, nobody. It was fortunate that she did not hear Mrs. Church's comment.

"Poor Jane! it really is a pity that, with her passion for children, she can't raise a single chick! And I suppose she never will now!"

On the Nuisance Inspectorship, however, all were agreed.

"It is not as if she were a plain girl!" Sarah said. "She is so very much better looking than Gwen, and might have married anybody!"

"Then there's Gwen!" Jane joined in, finding in the irritation of her spirit a pleasure in the discovery of a fresh subject for a philippic. "If we had not such absolute confidence in our dear Mr. Hatton, about whom we really know nothing at all, we might find that Gwen had let herself in for something extremely unpleasant!"

"You have not heard the last development?" Mrs. Church said interrogatively. "No, of course you haven't! I have only just heard it myself. Otto tells me that he happened to be passing by the little Greek temple which stands in that sort of copse, and, hearing voices, he looked in. They were much too absorbed to notice him; but, as far as I could make out, they were literally *in* each other's arms! What do

you think of that, dear mother?—you who always put the kindest construction upon everybody's actions?"

Whatever may have been Mamma's inward verdict upon this piece of news, her face, under the pent-house of its lacey hat, showed nothing but a serene high confidence.

"I think," she said smiling, "that our dear Otto, who is always so amusing, was in one of his joking moods, and trying to what boys call 'take a rise' out of you!"

Mrs. Church shook her head, daring, though very respectfully, to differ from her parent.

"He was not joking! He was very seriously displeased, and begged me to ask you to speak to them both!"

But Mamma, without directly declining, managed to shirk this commission with her usual easy grace. She looked up into the boughs of the tree above her with an air of pretty apprehension.

"I think," she said, "that my old enemy, the sun, is beginning to find me out, and that I shall be wiser to go home before he quite reaches me! Are you ready, my Luce?"

Of course, her Luce was ready, and in two minutes was in her normal attitude of butting, grinding slowly along the gravel walk with four words saying themselves over in her bent head, "In each other's arms."

She would ask Gwen whether they were true. As she came to this resolution, a wave of self-derision washed over her. It was useless to blink the fact that she had been thinking of herself as this man's object—thinking it, first with anger, and of late with pleasure ; thinking it despite her thirty-one years' experience of neglect and indifference ! And all the while she had only been Gwen's aunt ! Her pale cheeks burned ; but what did that matter ? When Granny was in the bath-chair, who would think of what was happening behind it ?

It was not till bed-time that she had an opportunity of putting her intention into execution. In the absence of his father, Gwen had taken entire charge of Diego—no sinecure ; had torn him away from the askers in the pond, which he had shown every intention of joining, by perilous leanings over the edge ; and had conveyed him, uninvited, to luncheon with some *nouveaux riches*, newcomers to the neighbourhood, in whom she scented *manicurean* possibilities, thus ably killing two birds with one stone.

To the great distress of the Churches, she *would* proclaim how she had fared in the hearing of the servants at dinner.

"The old man was no good ; he said he was much obliged, but his hands did very well as they were. But the girls were quite interested in our emollient cream ; and the young man has promised

to become a regular client, and to introduce us to his friends. I fancy that they have a large connection among soap-boilers. It is really a great opening."

"I did it on purpose!" she explained afterwards, with a delighted grin, as she followed her aunt into her dressing-room at bed-time—Lucia always slept in Mamma's room. "Did you see how Otto writhed and squirmed?"

But neither the grin nor the triumph was catching.

"I think if I were you, I would not make an enemy of Otto," Lucia answered.

Her tone was so extremely serious that Gwen looked at her in blank surprise.

"Why?"

"He might turn nasty if he knew anything about you that you had rather he did not!"

"*Knew anything about me that I had rather he did not!*" repeated the girl in an accent of astonishment, which, if not genuine, was certainly admirably counterfeited. "What *could* he know about me that I had rather he did not? That we are thinking of patenting the emollient cream?"

The question was put in such obvious good faith and the face of the speaker was so entirely free from the smallest trace of conscious guilt, that Lucia was for a moment staggered. Then the detailed

precision of the accusation recurred to her. Not even Otto could have invented the misdemeanour to which it referred.

"I suppose," she said slowly, "you were not aware that Otto was passing the Temple of Friendship this morning, while you were sitting in it with Mr. Hatton?"

"He listened? He heard what we were talking about?" There could be no doubt that *now* there was a hurry of apprehension in her voice, and Lucia's hesitation disappeared.

"I do not know what he *heard!*" she said, lowering her voice. "I only know what he *saw!*"

"*Saw!*"

"He told Sarah that he saw you 'in each other's arms'!"

There was a dead silence. In their utterer's ears the words, as they slowly dropped from her lips, sounded incredible. Never in all her twenty-three years had an accusation in the slightest degree resembling the one now preferred been brought against Gwen. None of her boisterous comradeships with unsuitable men had ever been credited with the faintest tinge of amorousness. Throughout the long course of her indiscretions and audacities, she had always been perfectly well-behaved.

Lucia had made her charge with eyes downcast, but as the silence lasted longer than seemed natural, she lifted them, and looked at her niece. She

scarcely recognized her. Gwen was as white as a table-cloth, and her eyes were like narrow coals of live green fire.

"How like that pig Otto!" she said; and left the room.

CHAPTER XXV

The exigencies of a dropsical wealth had taken Reuben away for a couple of nights. Having a great deal more money than he knew what to do with, his life was embittered by the difficulty of finding suitable investments for the gigantic sums that were always flowing into his treasury. He had tried to take leave of his love before his short absence in the Lady's Parlour; but in this Zillah had bested him.

During his absence she adhered dutifully to the programme he had framed for her, and gave daily sittings to Hatton, and took lessons—daily also—from Mr. Silbermein's chauffeur in driving his cars.

"I am distinctly of opinion," Mrs. Swinderby said, "that of all the new perils to society, chauffeurs are the most perilous. Did you ever see anything so radiant as Zillah looked this morning when she came back from her *tête-à-tête* drive with that good-looking man?"

This remark was not specially addressed to Zillah's mother, but the latter took it up.

"It is a mercy, Jane," she answered, growing

pinkish, "that you have no children! If you had, and they had been sensitive, like mine, you would have broken their hearts with unworthy suspicions!"

"I thank God that I have not any," Jane answered fiercely; "but, if I had, I should certainly not allow them to go out driving motors *tête-à-tête* with a man who looks like a very thinly disguised Count D'Orsay!"

But here Mamma struck in, though so violent a phrase ill described either Mrs. Granard's actions or her words.

"You are both so amusing," she said, wisely treating her daughters' bickering as a joke—her invariable and mostly successful practice—"but would one of you mind ringing the bell for my chicken jelly? I am afraid that Lucia has forgotten it."

Both rose eagerly to comply, and the danger was averted. In fact, a theme had been started upon which both were agreed.

"I can't think what has happened to Lucia of late," Sarah said. "She seems to be always woolgathering, and is never on the spot when she is wanted."

But Mamma shook her head in smiling prohibition.

"I know that it is your zeal for me that prompts you both, you dear things; but I can't hear a word against my Luce!"

With the mention of her name the offender entered.

"Have you had your jelly?" she asked. "I am afraid that I am a little behind time." Her words were repentant and kind, but her tone was abstracted and her eyes absent. "I am glad to find you both here," she went on, transferring her preoccupied glance from her mother to her sisters. "I wanted to tell you that Otto was mistaken—about Gwen! It must have been either a joke, as Mamma suggested, or an optical delusion."

"Does she deny it?" Sarah asked in a key of severe incredulity.

Lucia hesitated. After all, Gwen had *not* denied the imputed crime. A moment later—

"She despised the accusation too much to do that!"

"Well, it did seem incredible!" Jane said, but—wifely duty, perhaps, demanding it—there was scepticism in Sarah's eye.

Mamma must have noticed it, for, as always, she was ready with oil to pour on the troubled waters.

"That naughty little temple is very dark!" she said, half playfully, yet seriously too. "It must have been some odd trick of light that caused dear Otto's mistake! I am myself always seeing extraordinary things that have no existence except in my imagination, and yet you always tell me that my sight is still good!"

In her own heart Mrs. Granard breathed a very sincere aspiration that her daughters would each mind her own tiresome affairs, which were quite enough to occupy them, without insisting on dragging each other's skeletons out of their cupboards.

To dispute a decision of Mamma's was blasphemy, and the subject dropped. But later, the incredulity which Lucia had combated reappeared in her own mind. Gwen had not denied the accusation. She had said that Otto was a "pig;" but that was a truism, and not germane to the matter.

Whether guilty or innocent, one thing at least was certain, that the disapprobation of her family was not allowed in the least to modify the behaviour of Miss Baskerville; and that on the very same day as that on which Lucia had taken up her defence, she was giving new cause to her adversaries by being seen trailing up and down the green-swarded lime avenue in her long white gown by Hatton's side, for a good hour and a half. There was no attempt at disguise, nor was Gwen an easy person to hide. It seemed incredible, yet was true, that her lofty red head and rather *voyant* green *en tout cas* were seen to re-enter the Temple of Friendship! Hatton had returned from London late on the previous evening, and she had had no opportunity for private speech with him till this morning.

"Well!" she cried—"well!" when in the

eyes of the household she had brazenly stridden across the grass to join him.

She was too excited to offer him any preliminary salutation ; but he did not notice it. A heavy preoccupation sat on his brow.

"Did you see them ?" she asked impatiently. "Have they promised to let you know as soon as they get an answer to their advertisement ? How soon did they think they might possibly get a wire from him ? I suppose it depends so entirely upon where he is, and whether he happens to see or be told of it ?"

Hatton lifted his eyes to her eager face, and they looked dull and as if sleep had not lately visited them.

"He *has* seen it !" he replied, speaking with unmistakable reluctance. "He has answered it ; he is in England !"

"*In England !*" she repeated, with a sort of little screech of delight. "Well, the plot *is* thickening !"

"We have been looking for him on the other side of the globe, and he has been here all the while —for several months past, apparently. He wrote from a slum near the river !"

This communication was made with the same reluctant dejection as the former.

"*A slum near the river !* Oh, poor fellow ! he *must* have been in low water ! And the legacy,—is it worth having ? anything considerable ? enough to make them comfortable ?"

"It is a large fortune, and has come to him quite unlooked for—one of those cases of several intervening lives unexpectedly falling in."

"Good Heavens! what luck! And have they —the lawyers—seen him yet?"

"No; he has an appointment with them for to-day."

"And you did not stay? you did not wait to see him?" she cried in an accent of the keenest and most astonished reproach.

"No," he answered, and though the dejection was still audible in his tones, it was dominated by a yet stronger feeling—an inflexible resolution. "No, and what is more, I will not see him nor go a step further in the matter, until I am much surer than I have any reason for being now, that we are acting in accordance with *her* wishes!"

Miss Baskerville's equanimity was seldom disturbed, but at this determined looking back from the plough, on the part of her confederate, she had to hold herself together for several seconds before she could speak with her usual bright cheerfulness.

"You propose to ask her?—to consult her?"

"*I!* Good God, no! You do not suppose that I am the sort of chap to thrust myself into people's confidences against their will? Is it likely that I should presume to——?" He broke off in angry suffocation.

"Then it is *I* that am to find out?"

He turned his face a little aside, and the idea irrelevantly struck Gwen that he had not a bad profile.

"Yes," he answered low, but not indistinctly. "*You* find out—find out whether after all these years she still feels the same about him? There's precious little of any of us that is not changed in fourteen years!"

His tone seemed to say that there was something comforting in this last reflection; but if he had used it as a prop to his spirits, it was immediately knocked from under him.

"If that is all you want to know," Gwen cried triumphantly, "I can at once relieve your mind without troubling her. You should have seen and heard her on that night when she first told me—I should rather say when I first dragged her poor little story out of her. I suppose that if one goes in for that sort of thing, and has never had but one lover, one does stick to him like—like—what *does* stick most closely?" As her hearer did not come to her aid with an adhesive simile, she sailed on. "I believe that the wish to help her formulated itself in my mind that very first evening, but I do not suppose that it could ever have taken practical form unless I had got you to help me!"

This handsome acknowledgment of the value of the aid rendered by him did not seem to have so

tonic an effect upon Hatton as might have been expected.

"You must prepare her," he said, prefacing his speech with a deep-drawn sigh, "for the fact that she will probably find him unrecognizable. When a fellow has been rolling downhill for fourteen years, there is not much left of him when he gets to the bottom. What do you suppose that this slum life of his has been since he got back home?"

"Pooh!" she said magnificently. "Lucia's crown of happiness will be the helping him up again. If we shy away from our fellow-men because they have got a smudge or two of mud upon their garments, what becomes of the solidarity of humanity?"

But her hearer was not in a state of mind to care what became of it, and said so with some force.

CHAPTER XXVI

"I AM glad that I have found you," Lucia said an hour or two later, coming into the delightful, shabby, untidy, sunny room, in which Gwen had gathered her heterogeneous possessions round her.

"I am not a very difficult object to discover generally!—at least not much more so than the church tower!" Miss Baskerville answered laughing, and laying down the pen which she had been holding between her fingers among the unparalleled litter of her writing-table. "I brought down from the office some of our accounts to run over quietly; and I have never had a moment to do it in till this morning. I believe that we shall turn over twice as much next year as we have done this. The one advantage of poor Zillah's marriage is that it opens out a wide field for us among the Jews. Those kind of Oriental peoples are always so fond of unguents and washes; and I shall push our 'cream' vigorously among them; though Otto would *kill* me if he heard me say so."

An opening was what Lucia wanted; and she took it.

"It was about Otto—in a way, that I wanted to speak to you!"

There was no doubt that Gwen reddened as well as shrugged her shoulders.

"What! has he been looking through any more key-holes?" she asked derisively, yet with an evident determination to keep good-humoured.

"Not that I know of! And do not for a moment think that I believe that he really saw—what he thought he did"—flushing as she spoke, more delicately yet more intensely than her niece—"but he has not a very refined mind. And you must allow that you give him a handle by your conduct!"

Gwen looked away nonchalantly out of window at the stiff little yew trees, and patterned figures of box-edged bloom in the Dutch garden beneath her windows.

"I suppose I do."

"You make yourself very conspicuous with Mr. Hatton."

"Yes." Such acquiescence was baffling; and Miss Granard came to a pause. After a moment or two, "I suppose," she said, while one hand fidgeted unconsciously among the hopeless confusion of her niece's papers, upon which her eyes rested unseeingly, "that you are aware that Mr. Hatton has a wife?"

"On the contrary, I am aware that he has not!"

"What do you mean? How can you know that?"

"I asked him!"

"*Asked him?*"

"Yes! How else was I to find out?"

There was a pause of stupefaction on the aunt's part, while the niece again took up her pen.

"He told you that he had not a wife?"

"Yes. I asked him, 'Are you married?' and he answered, 'No'! He did not seem to want to say anything more; and I did not want to find out anything more just then; so we stopped there."

Lucia was silent, her inexhaustible wonder at her niece's methods quenched for the moment in the acute interest of the fact so indelicately arrived at. The unfaithful wife was dead, then? or did he only mean that she was dead to *him?*

"If you have any curiosity upon the subject, I can easily reopen it!" Gwen said handsomely; receiving without resentment the precipitate refusal of the offer by the person to whom it was made. "It is rather ungrateful of you," Miss Baskerville continued, coolly considering her aunt's face, disproportionately enraged, as it seemed to her, at the suggestion, "to be so anxious to disclaim the slightest interest in him; for he has spent a great deal of time and trouble upon *you!*"

"Upon *me?*"

"Yes; he wishes me to tell you about it. In fact—I think it is a mistake, but he positively refuses to go a step further in it without your express consent!"

The outraged look on Lucia's face had given way to one of blankest astonishment.

"What are you talking about?"

"The idea, of course, was originally mine, but without his help it would have had to remain an idea; and though he does not seem nearly as keen about it now as he did at first, he is quite ready to take the final steps if you will give him leave."

"*Final steps?* What *final steps?*"

The bewilderment in Miss Granard's voice was growing tinged with apprehension, and even the dauntless Gwen hesitated.

"Please speak out," Lucia said in an alarmingly quiet key. "I should like to know if this is some stupid mystification or one of your deplorable practical jokes!"

Miss Baskerville's long, lithe body moved uneasily on her chair.

"I suppose I had better begin at the beginning," she said in a less assured voice than usual. "You see, he thought that you looked very unhappy."

"What business was that of his?"

"And he knew the cause. He had heard of it

from Mr. Carruthers long ago; he told you that himself."

Silence.

"And the idea struck him—well, it struck *me* first—that it might not be too late even yet to repair the injury done—to make you happy together after all, if we could only bring him back. Of course, the first thing was to find him, and we have been searching for him all over the globe for the last two months."

The narrative had not run very smoothly at first, but it gained in glibness and volume as it flowed on, though it cannot be said to have been much helped by the listener, who still maintained an utter silence, and had even wholly turned away. There was not much encouragement to proceed in the look of her straight, slight back, yet Miss Baskerville continued—

"We might have gone on unsuccessfully for ever if it had not been for an advertisement addressed to him, which I saw in the *Times* two days ago, and which had been put in by a firm of lawyers who wanted to communicate to him that he has come into a large fortune. Of course, I sent Hatton up at once to interview them. Judge of our surprise and delight when we found that he had already seen and answered their advertisement; that while we were hunting for him in the Antipodes, he had been for months in England—in short, that there is no

reason why he should not be down here to-morrow or the day after if you give him leave."

If the story had begun haltingly, it ended—warmed and heightened by the speaker's eloquence—on a note of triumph.

As she ended, Lucia turned slowly round and faced her, and Miss Baskerville gave a start. In an instant she realized that she had never before known what pallor could be, nor what unknown tones were latent in a voice that had sounded in her ears since childhood.

"So this is your mystery?" the unknown voice said. "This is what you and Mr. Hatton laid yourselves open to Otto's coarse conjectures to concoct? I have not been a fortunate woman, but I never expected to drink so deeply of the cup of humiliation as I have done to-day!"

So saying, she turned towards the door, walking as if she did not quite see where it was. Before she had reached it, Gwen had sprung upon her.

"For God's sake, do not go away with such a horrible misapprehension!" she cried out in very real dismay at the effect produced by her narrative. "You fly off at a tangent, with an entire misunderstanding!"

Lucia paused in her uncertain walk. "Did you suppose," she asked almost under her breath, "that it could be *gratifying* to me to have indecent

overtures made in my name to a man with whom I had had no communication for fourteen years?"

"They were not made in your name, and they were not indecent, and they have not been made at all!" Gwen cried, her words tumbling over each other in the hurry and passion of her self-exculpation.

She paused for breath, and her aunt remained with the intense reproach of her steely eyes fixed on Miss Baskerville's agitated face.

"You were not to appear at all in it! Your name has not been—never was to be mentioned! Mr. Hatton made all his inquiries for *himself*. Surely a man may be allowed to try to find out what has become of a friend whom he had last seen in very unprosperous circumstances!"

But the hard lines of Miss Granard's face did not relax.

"He was not a friend of Mr. Hatton's! Mr. Hatton spoke of him as of a pauper and a pariah!"

"Oh, that was only his way, to enhance his own generosity! But he really *has* a very kind feeling towards him—quite enough to make him glad that he has got his head above water again, and to wish to tell him so."

She paused, memory presenting to her an inconveniently different picture from the one she was drawing of Hatton's attitude of mind towards the

situation in question; but suppressing any misgivings on this head, she went on—

"When he saw Mr. Carruthers he could have asked him to run down here for a day or two—mother never minds who asks whom to this house: she would have a bad time of it if she *did*—and you might have met quite naturally, and without the slightest injury to your dignity."

As Miss Baskerville thus unrolled her project, her voice, disclaiming all minor tones, again swelled into triumph. But there was not much triumph in the slow and difficult answer that responded to her.

"I suppose," Lucia said, "that you meant well; but you do not seem to realize what a monstrous thing you did in dragging to the light, and laying bare my most private concerns before a man—an absolute stranger to me, and——"

"And a *bounder!*" Gwen interrupted, finishing the sentence. "Well, no doubt he is that; but he is an uncommonly good-hearted one. And, after all, what are these trumpery class distinctions?"

Miss Baskerville's grandiloquent platitudes were apt to irritate her aunt; but this one Lucia did not seem even to hear. She stood with hands folded and head bowed in an attitude of the most humiliated dejection.

"Of course, I have no personal experience of *love*," Gwen said, with a faint tint of misgiving

for the first time colouring her speech, and with an unintentional stress of contempt upon the noun. "But I thought, if you went in for that sort of thing in the early Victorian way, you would be so glad to get back the—the man you cared about, that you would not much mind what vehicle brought him!"

At the reproach implied, Lucia's bent head went up, and her eyes flashed.

"What business was it of yours or his?" she asked with a deep indignation. "Never with my consent would you have heard of it! It was *my* affair—mine—*mine* only; and it was so long—long ago!"

Her speech, begun in anger, died on a wailing note, into which all the weariness, the emptiness, the dull suffering of her fourteen years seemed to have passed.

"*Long ago!*" repeated Gwen, looking at her companion, pityingly, and speaking not at all brutally, but with a sort of respectful curiosity. "But if it had been the *real thing*, I should have thought that *that* would not have mattered!"

The other started, as if she had been stung. "Perhaps it was not the real thing!" she answered in a hollow voice.

"Oh, but it *was!*—it *is!*" Gwen cried tempestuously, snatching Lucia's cold and trembling hand in her large warm grasp; "though you may

not like our methods of attaining our object, you *do* want to get him back? You *would* like to see him again? You *have* not forgotten him?"

For all answer, Miss Granard snatched her hands out of her niece's clasp, and fled from the room.

CHAPTER XXVII

"The only explanation of a person locking herself into her bedroom in the daytime, is that she is going to commit suicide!" Jane Swinderby said, with a shrug.

"Had she locked herself in?"

"Yes."

"And would not let you in?"

"Not till I had nearly flayed my knuckles with knocking, and even then she only opened the door a chink, and, as far as I could see her face, she seemed to have been crying!"

"*Lucia!*" "*Lucia crying!*" "What *can Lucia* have to cry about?" they all exclaimed, in varying tones of incredulity.

"I think that it must have been an optical delusion!" Mrs. Granard's voice always made other voices sound harsh and shrill, and its dove quality was conspicuous now as it floated in softly among the different sharpnesses of her daughters' tones. "It would break my heart if I thought my Luce had any cause for crying!"

"My explanation is that every one in this house, with the exception of Mamma, has gone slightly mad!" Jane said trenchantly. "There is Gwen, who has been persuading all the stablemen to be manicured! Nobody can say that *she* is not as mad as a hatter. Freddy—well, dear Freddy, we all know that he always has several slates off! And Zillah! I could hardly believe it was she when I met her just now, getting out of the car, and laughing immoderately at something that the chauffeur was saying to her."

"I suppose I am very old-fashioned," Anne said, half apologetically, "but I *can't* get used to girls being so hand-in-glove with their chauffeurs!"

Mrs. Church gave a slight snort. "I should have thought that Gwen would have acclimatized you to most things!"

But Anne was not a fighter, and would probably have drawn in her horns, even if Mamma had not been, as ever, ready with oil to pour on the family waves.

"Dear little Zillah is always so anxious to set any one at their ease whom she thinks at all in an inferior position," Mrs. Granard said. "And as to her laugh, I love to hear it. It does not come very often, but it is so infectious when it does. I have heard it oftener than usual of late," turning a little, as if in pleasant congratulation upon this fact, to the bride-elect's mother.

The latter drew a breath of satisfaction, and expanded her chest.

"Yes," she replied, trying honestly to keep the too-much of triumph out of her voice. "I think you must all be beginning to realize that I know my own child best. Because she is naturally a thoughtful girl, who does not take an all-important step heedlessly, and because you do not think Reuben attractive externally—in which I must own I agree with you—you chose to believe that she was a victim driven to the sacrifice! Now that it is patent that she is going of her own accord, and going with a radiant face, you will perhaps acknowledge your mistake."

There was a general silence, broken only by a softly murmured protest from Mamma against the misjudgment thus generally imputed. Then Jane spoke.

"It is the suddenness of the change that takes one by surprise. Three or four days ago she looked broken-hearted."

Mrs. Church gave a short and rather contemptuous laugh.

"My dear Jane, when one has a preconceived idea, one makes everything square with it. You were determined that Zillah was broken-hearted, so you persuaded yourself that she looked so."

Mrs. Swinderby's always healthy colour—the damp of her Lincolnshire fens had been kind to her complexion—deepened somewhat.

"It was *not* fancy or prejudice on my part! We *all* thought so." As she spoke she looked hard at the other two for confirmation of her assertion; but such is the frailty of human nature that both averted their eyes, and tacitly denied her their support.

But Mamma said gently, "At least we are all agreed that she looks beamingly happy *now*, and that is what *really* matters."

It was evident that Mrs. Granard wished the subject to be ended; and so of course it was, Anne restoring the talk to a safe channel by saying, with an incredulous accent—

"What on earth Lucia, of all people, can have to cry about puzzles me! *Lucia*, with not a care in the world, and *always with Mamma!*"

Here at least was a topic upon which all were in harmony, and for a quarter of an hour they spent themselves in ejaculations upon the monstrous phenomenon of Lucia's tears.

Meanwhile, in the Temple of Friendship, a dialogue was going forward between the two usual occupiers of that little fane, as they sat side by side on the circular stone bench that ran round it.

"Well!" said the woman in a tone of triumph, "I have done it!"

"Done what?"

"I have broken the ice. I have threshed out the subject with her."

"Yes?"

"And you may lay aside your misgivings. It is as I thought. She cares *quite* as much as ever! It would be odd if I did not know my own aunt!"

"As you have done during the last fourteen years!" Hatton answered, with an irony whose bitterness seemed disproportioned to the harmless brag that had called it forth.

But Gwen was not abashed. "Ah! that was because I really never gave her a thought. I took her for granted. One should never take one's fellow-creatures for granted."

His eyes were fixed on the gaudy green straw hat circled with rollicking vine-branches which his companion had just snatched off her head and tossed on to the stone table that somewhat incongruously furnished the middle of the temple.

"So—she—cares—as—much—as—ever?" he said, with little pauses between each word.

"*Quite! more than ever*, if possible."

"She—told—you—so?" still with that sort of interposing hesitation.

"*Told me so!*" repeated Gwen, scornfully. "Will you never be brought to realize the quality of nineteenth-century delicacy? She would far rather have been torn in small pieces by red-hot pincers than *tell* me anything of the sort!"

His eyes sprang up suddenly with a flash of

hope in them, and five short eager words shot out of his mouth—

"How do you know, then?"

Gwen laughed confidently. "There are indications that no woman—not even such a tyro as I—can misunderstand."

Hatton's look declined again upon the hat. "She wishes it to go on, then?—wishes me to see him, to bring him down here?"

A slight look of perplexity dawned on Miss Baskerville's face, and she passed one hand meditatively through her ruddy fleece before answering—

"Well, as to that," she said slowly, "we must go a little cautiously! With a person of Lucia's character and date, dignity comes before everything! I must own to you that her dignity was frightfully hurt at the mere idea of a comparative stranger like you having anything to do with the matter. It makes things very difficult, but she is like that! I suppose a person can no more step off their own *date* than they can off their own shadow!"

This reflection was made in a tone of sincere, if rather "superior" compassion; but Hatton did not hear it. He heard only the acknowledgment that preceded it.

"I knew it!" he said, in a tone whose sharp pain was crossed by a species of exultation. "I knew her better than you did! I knew that she was not that sort!"

"I never saw her so angry in all my life!" Gwen said, acquiescing with her usual jovial candour in this estimate of her error, and indeed enlarging upon its effects. "Sparks flew from her eyes! She looked quite handsome!"

At this meagre tribute to her aunt's charms, Hatton darted at his unconscious neighbour a look largely tinged with his old distaste; but she went on in happy unknowingness.

"She asked me if I was aware what an outrageous thing I had done in laying bare the secrets of her heart to——"

"To such as *me!* Don't be afraid of hurting my feelings! They have had some roughish treatment in their day!" He half turned away his face as he spoke; then, as if bethinking himself that even such a partial averting was a want of pluck, brought his eyes full and steadily back to hers.

"There is no question of hurting your feelings!" Gwen answered good-humouredly. "I am not at all fond of hurting people's feelings! If it had been anything that could hurt your feelings, I should not have told it you! Nobody could be hurt at being called 'a comparative stranger'! We must all have been strangers to each other once—even you and I!"

As she delivered herself of this friendly platitude, good will towards him beamed from her

narrow green eyes. But it bred no answering cheerfulness in his.

"She was perfectly right!" he answered gloomily. "You had no business to tell me! I said so at the time."

"But if I had not told you, how could you have helped her?"

"*Helped her!*" he repeated with scorn. "She is so grateful for our *help*, isn't she? Haven't you just told me that you never saw her so angry in your life?"

Miss Baskerville regarded her ruffled confederate with a severe and superior pity.

"I wish I had not told you, since you take it so entirely by the wrong end as you are doing. If I said that she was angry, I also said that she cares as much as ever! I am as certain of the one as of the other!"

"Why are you certain?"

There was a hungry disbelief coupled with angry misgiving in his tone.

Gwen paused a moment. "H'm!" she said, as if seeking for the most convincing word. "It is difficult to describe; but if you had been there you would have been as sure as I was."

"I doubt it," he said between his teeth.

"Oh yes, you would! At the last you could not have failed to be convinced. You should have just seen her face when I suggested that perhaps,

after all, it had not been the *real thing!* It was more than she could bear. She rushed out of the room—I am almost sure in floods of tears; and Lucia does not cry easily!"

There was a pause. Then, "I suppose you are right," the man said, speaking as if a weight were hung upon his tongue, impeding utterance. "But after what you have told me about what she thinks of *my* meddling with her affairs—God knows she can't hold a stronger opinion about it than I do myself—even you can't expect me to go on with a business which I had rather my right hand had been cut off than that I had ever tampered with it!"

His companion looked at him, her unruffled serenity tempered with a slight surprise at his needless emphasis of repudiation.

"Did you never hear of doing people good against their will?" she asked. "That is what we are trying to compass! Under all her indignation, her conventional hurt propriety, I could see deep, deep down in her poor heart the longing to have her idyll beginning over again! It made me feel ashamed of my obtuseness in having lived for fourteen years side by side with such a sorrow without ever having suspected it!"

Her hearer had again and more completely turned away his head from her. She could see nothing but the firm outline of his tanned

cheek, and the ripple of hair lighter than itself above it.

"It was, of course, a pity that you did not see him!" Miss Baskerville proceeded presently. "You have so made up your mind that he has become unpresentable, that I should be glad for you to have had the chance of correcting that impression! But, after all," with a bright return to her usual sanguine strain, "what *does* a little veneer more or less matter?"

"*She* would think that it mattered a great deal!" he answered ruefully.

Gwen regarded him for a moment curiously. "I know why you say that. Of course, she is full of class prejudices, but she is getting better daily. Have not you noticed a decided change in her manner to you?"

Hatton jerked his head impatiently. "Her manner to me makes no great odds! *I* do not count. I am not one to notice manners!" There was a touch of his old bravado in the concluding clause, but it had quite vanished from his next sentence, uttered in a low key of mortification. "If she had begun to think me rather more within the pale of humanity, you have succeeded in disabusing her of the idea!"

For the first time a puzzled look of misgiving clouded the confidence of Gwen's green eyes.

"Perhaps I may have been a little clumsy in my way of handling it," she said; "but I had no idea that you would take it so much to heart! If the idea were not so perfectly ludicrous, I should almost think——"

He did not ask her what she almost thought.

CHAPTER XXVIII

It was the measure of what a stupid woman Lucia was, that when, on emerging from her bower, she was challenged as to why she had immured herself in it, she had not a word to say in answer.

The question was put to her somewhat crudely by Jane Swinderby. She was the outspoken one of the sisterhood, and her family admired the quality in her, and found it very useful—that is to say, all did except the one member upon whom her artillery was temporarily turned.

"Otto has a horror of any one locking themselves into their rooms!" Sarah said, in that deferential tone with which she always quoted her husband's utterances. "He once knew an old lady in Nürnberg, who was burnt to death in consequence of doing so. A fire broke out in the house; she was deaf, and asleep on her good ear; they could not make her hear; so she was burnt to a cinder before they could get in!"

There was a moment of interested silence; the interest arising less from the grisly nature of the tale than from an inward speculation on the part

of all the hearers as to what place in the mysterious hierarchy of Otto's relations the Nürnberg victim had occupied. Then—

"That is not quite a parallel case," Mrs. Swinderby said in a drily humorous voice. "Lucia could not well have been 'asleep on her good ear' at three o'clock in the afternoon!"

They all laughed; and Mamma said in her softly final way—

"We will not tease her any more about it! After all, it is no crime to lock one's door, either at midday or midnight, and I dare say dear Lucia had some little worry that she wanted to think over quietly!"

Lucia gave a tight smile, and the subject dropped. But the words haunted her with ironical iteration through many subsequent hours: "*A little worry!*"

Was it "*a little worry*" to have had one's self-respect dragged through the mire of a common man's compassion? To have had the one sacredly hoarded and hidden secret of one's sad life exposed to the vulgar pity of his coarse gaze?

But was this the worst? Was not there below this depth of humiliation a deeper abyss, her first horrified glance into which had made her lock her door, and throw herself face downwards on her never-occupied bed?—never-occupied, since it was her life-long duty and high privilege to sleep in Mamma's room, and not even night brought her any privacy.

What was this hideous *worse*, this gulf of shame yawning below the ostensible cause of her abasement? Was it not that what gave the intolerable smart to the inflicted wound was not that an underbred semi-stranger had with extraordinary want of delicacy been employed to bring her back her lover, but that *he had been willing to undertake the commission!*

What was this unutterably abasing delusion that she had been nourishing about him—this belief, dating almost from the very outset of their acquaintance, that Hatton's interest in her was of the kind that other women inspired in men; that none but the faraway Carruthers had ever felt in her? It had been a belief reluctantly entertained with disdain and aversion for weeks; a belief that of late had changed and become—*what?*

Since when had it changed? Since when had she ceased to regard the society of the man whom in her *for intérieur* she had scarcely even yet left off qualifying as "that bounder," merely as a disagreeable means for obtaining information about her long-lost but ever-mourned love? Since when—oh, deepest depth of degradation!—had she ceased to have the least wish for that long-lost and ever-mourned love to be restored to her? Her inner life had always been a life of shadows, in which the memory of Carruthers had been the only reality! Now that *that* was gone, what was left her? What but an ever, *ever*, EVER-burning shame?

How was she to convey to this man, this object of her fatuous hallucination, that his soul- and body-abasing good offices were not wanted ?—that his interference was undesired, intolerable, unspeakable ? He must be told ; but by *whom ?* By *herself ?* By *her ?—Lucia ?—her*, to whom it seemed physically impossible that, with the knowledge *now* between them, she could ever, *ever* again be in the same hemisphere with him ? And yet, if he were *not* told, he would *go on ;* pushed and urged by Gwen's blundering zeal, he would carry through his unutterable mission—would perhaps succeed in it.

It was at this point that Mrs. Swinderby's knuckles began to make themselves audible on the door, followed by her surprised and indignant voice—

"Lucia ! Lucia ! Are you there ? Why have you locked yourself in ? Open the door at once ! Mamma wants you ! "

CHAPTER XXIX

Mrs. Baskerville's annual party had drawn to its close. Her finances had this year been less able than usual to bear the strain consequent upon it; as, thanks to the hard-heartedness of Freddy's last *innamorata*, more expensive presents than ever had been needed to propitiate her. Yet Anne's hospitable soul sent the tears to her eyes at the thought that her one yearly opportunity of *giving* was over; and besides, well as Mamma seemed, and, thank God, had really been all through the visit, who could tell whether she would be spared to pay another?

Some of the party had already departed—Reuben, Otto, and Bob Swinderby—the latter, to his wife's warmly expressed indignation, unable and unattempting to disguise his joy at the prospect of returning to what he gracefully alluded to as "his own dunghill."

Hatton had gone two days earlier, but had returned to pick up Diego, and—with yet another object.

"There is no doubt that we have made a terrible mess of it!" Gwen said.

Miss Baskerville was scarcely recognizable. Her

face was swollen with crying ; her eyes, never a conspicuous feature except by their odd green tint, were almost extinguished ; and her very voice had lost its clear, loud clarion quality, and sounded muffled and muted. And God Lyæus would have disowned the countenance incongruously crowned by its Bacchic hat.

Hatton was not weeping ; but his face expressed a stunned dejection which outwent his companion's clamorous woe. His acquiescence in her statement of their *fiasco* was too deep to need or be capable of uttered assent.

"And *this* coming on the top of my own trouble!" pursued Miss Baskerville, in half-sobbing ejaculation. "If any one had told me that Jessie would go out and marry a student from Bart.'s without a *hint* to me!—that she should marry *at all!*—she who had such a *horror* of marriage! She *far* outwent me! Often and often she has said that it was 'a *wen* upon the face of civilization'!"

Neither speaker nor hearer felt the smallest inclination to smile at this pretty *trope*. Hatton still kept his stony silence ; not so much unsympathizing with as unhearing of her jeremiad!

"But even *that* pales before *this!* Tell it me all over again—from the beginning!"

Then he spoke, but his loud, confident voice had apparently followed her shrill clarion one into extinction.

"Why should I tell you again what you know already?"

"I was so upset, I did not half take it in! Tell me again! You went up to the lawyer's office yesterday?"

"Yes."

"At the hour at which he had made an appointment to be there?"

"Yes."

"And he was not there?"

"No."

"And you got his address at Portsmouth?"

"Yes."

"And he was not at his lodgings?"

"No."

"And they told you he was at the Seaman's Rest, round the corner, celebrating his wedding with the barmaid there? Oh! *oh!!* OH!!!"

She threw her head down into her hands, as if unable to face the picture thus conjured up; and for a little space there was no sound but that of her sobs. Then she raised a countenance more overset and disfigured than the calm walls of the Temple of Friendship had ever before presumably sheltered, and said, in a choked voice and with a look of hopeless appeal to her silent companion—

"What *are* we to do? We *have* made a mess of it!"

He was generous, or, more probably—since he

was never one to sit down under an injustice to himself—too dumbed by the catastrophe to utter any protest against the use of the plural pronoun.

"After having raised her hopes so high, to have to dash them to the earth! And Jessie, too! To leave me without a word! Leave me with the flat on my hands! and my ideal shattered to atoms!"

Under the weight of this complicated burden of woe, Miss Baskerville's face again went down into her hands.

Hatton's suffering was less complicated, since he did not care in the least about Jessie or the flat; but no one who had looked in his face could have doubted its being as acute.

"We ought to have made surer of him before we broached the subject!" Miss Baskerville said presently, when partially recovered from her collapse, and still employing that inexcusable plural pronoun, which, as before, remained unprotested against. "One sees that *now*, but at the time the news that he had come into a fortune seemed to make it so probable and easy, that one could not resist the temptation to tell her!"

"You said that it made her very angry," he answered; but the uncertainty of his voice showed how faint was the flicker of hope that dictated the suggestion; and even that flicker Gwen hastened to blow out. "Oh, but under the surface anger one could see the deep, *deep* feeling! If you had seen

her face when I suggested that perhaps it had not been the real thing after all! and the way she fled out of the room, and her burst of tears! and she does not cry easily!"

There was a slight sound as of one writhing under a lash, which must have proceeded from the other occupant of Friendship's bench.

"I know! You told me before. We need not go over all that again!"

"But who is to tell her?" the girl asked, still keeping her tear-blurred eyes fixed in hopeless asking upon Hatton's face.

To that there was no manner of answer.

"You do not think that it would come best from *you?*"

"I think that you must be out of your wits to suggest such a thing!"

The nature of this proposal evidenced the pitch of distraughtness to which her dual calamities had brought Gwen. It also succeeded in transforming her hearer back again from stone to outraged flesh and blood.

"Then I am sure I do not know what is to happen!" she said in utter limpness of despair, and for a few moments there was no sound but the hot, glad hum of the summer insects outside.

Then once more the woman spoke; but this time it was clear that the indiarubber-like elasticity of her nature had begun to reassert itself.

"After all, it is quite possible that if we do not tell her at all, she may never hear of it. It is not as if he were a man in society. I do not suppose that when people marry barmaids at Seaman's Rests they put it in the *Morning Post*. The whole thing might fizzle out as if it had never been. But I do not know how *we* are ever to forgive ourselves for having brought such a cruel disappointment upon her!"

A silent writhing was again the sole protest made by its victim against this brazen perversion of fact. It seemed, at all events, to bring some solace to Miss Baskerville's vexed spirit, for it was in a livelier key that she said, with pricked ear—

"Isn't some one calling me? Yes, it is the Little One. I must not keep him waiting. He, too, is perfectly wretched to-day."

Without stopping to specify the cause of her father's woe, she hastened away, and left Hatton to face their *fiasco* alone. He was hardly aware of her departure, staring in half-stunned horror at the situation that she had created for him. After a while—he did not know how long—the sense of having had a blow on the head and having been knocked out of time gave way to a sharper realization of the position.

This was what his officious efforts to spare her, to make life a little easier to her, to lift a fraction of the dull burden life and selfishness had laid on her

back, had come to! He had been made the instrument of causing her the acutest, bitterest pain and mortification of which a nature such as hers was capable. *He* had done this! *he* had been gulled and driven into it!—*he* who had always been so remarkable for his clear cool head! *he* whom other chaps had so often consulted, because they were so sure of getting a good sound opinion from *him!*

He laughed out loud, and the sound was so strange that a bird—one of the few that still lifted their little cheerful voices in August—stopped its piping.

But after all, *that* was nothing. Of what consequence was it to find that one was not such a fine fellow as one had thought? If *that* were all! That he should have thought—no! he never had thought it—but that he should have let himself be pushed and persuaded into this profane intrusion into her life! that such as he should have dared to make or meddle in her lifelong grief—the grief that had made her cheeks so pale and her dear grey eyes so melancholy! In one thing the accomplice of his crime was right—it was a lifelong grief! She would never get over it! She was not that sort! But if only they had left her alone—left her to bear that burden to which, by long carrying, her poor back must have grown partly used!

But now that they had forced themselves upon her with their cursed officious interference, stirring

the whole thing up again, raising new hopes—Gwen was no doubt right in *that* too : under all her anger she *had* hoped—only to end in this pitiful disappointment !

And that *he* should have brought it on her !—*he !* How should he ever forgive himself ? how should he ever dare to look in her face again ? He covered his face with his hands, and two tears stole through his fingers.

CHAPTER XXX

A SLIGHT noise made him hurriedly lift his head in horrified consciousness of surprisal. The object of his miserable self-reproaches stood before him, on the threshold of the temple; even now, as he looked, not only on the threshold, but coming resolutely in, undeterred by the discovery of his presence; nay, as it would seem, determined by that very fact to enter.

He was conscious of getting on his legs, taking off his hat, standing—could it be *he* that was trembling so?—before her; awaiting in wretched submission whatever unendurable yet well-deserved chastisement she was about to inflict upon him.

One glance at her face had told him that there could be no doubt as to why she had come. He could not endure to meet the blinding aversion of the eyes that had of late—or so he had fancied—begun to look a little more tolerantly on him, and his own sank to the ground.

"I thought that I might find you here," were her first words.

To his ear there was an unaccountable accent of

irony in them. He could not know that she was recalling Otto Church's anecdote as to the sight that had shocked his decorum on that very spot.

"I wished to speak to you."

He had thought that he could keep silence, and utter no groan under the lash that was going to descend on his spirit's shoulders. But already that tone was taxing him beyond his strength. He stretched out his hands before him, as if to ward off a blow, and yet said—

"Yes! Make haste! Say *anything!* You can't say more than I deserve!"

But she did not immediately avail herself of the permission. Oh that she would speak! Anything would be better than those hard-drawn breaths so near him; and that face—so near too—from the sight of which his guilty eyes shrank, annihilated.

At last, "You know, then, the subject upon which I am compelled to speak to you?"

"Yes."

Another silence.

"It would be useless to attempt to qualify your conduct?"

"Yes."

"Even now I am scarcely able to realize that you should have been guilty of such an *outrage!*"

At that he gave a terrible wince, but his acquiescence came, just audible and perfectly submissive.

"Yes."

Her speech was coming more fluently now; she seemed to be even deriving a dreadful pleasure from the withering scorn with which she was flaying him.

"That you should have allowed yourself to entertain for an instant an idea so *monstrous!*"

"Yes."

"So *incredible!*"

"Yes."

"So beyond the reach of words!"

"Yes."

She paused, as if either exhausted or to lay in a fresh stock of invective. He waited, without the smallest change of attitude.

"It would be useless to ask you why you went out of your way to insult a person who had never done you an injury?" she said presently.

His head sank a little lower on his chest. He must bear that too, that almost unendurable misrepresentation of his purpose—*almost*, not *quite*.

"I know," she went on, "that you were only a tool, that it was not done on your own initiative; but how you could have allowed yourself to become the agent of such a—— how you could have been willing to lend a helping hand to the degradation of——"

She broke off. She had over-estimated her strength, her power to qualify his unqualifiable crime. At the word "degradation," his low-sunk

head had been flung up, and an intense life had flashed back into his dead eyes.

"*Degradation!*" he repeated. "*Whose?*"

"*Whose?*" she echoed, at a white heat of indignation, which seemed to give her some relief. "Whose but mine—*mine!*"

There was a slight pause, as between two levin-bolts.

"And you think," he said very slowly, but no longer stooping, or seeking to avoid the steely rage of her eyes, "that *I* wished to degrade *you?*"

Truth is seldom seen absolutely naked, but when she is it is difficult to mistake her. Something in the turn of his phrase, or the mode of its delivery, must have staggered his hearer, for though her next words were not less stinging than their predecessors, yet his tortured ear was conscious of a difference in their tone.

"I do not know what you *wished.* I only know what you *did!*"

"Yes," he said. "Yes; it was as bad as could be. But before you say anything more—God knows I do not want to hinder you from saying anything you feel inclined, you cannot say anything I shall not agree with—but before you say anything more, I should like to explain that—that there never was any question of compromising you, of bringing you in in any way!"

There was a flaying scorn in the tone with which she received this.

"And how was I to be kept out?"

"It was all to—to come about accidentally," he said, floundering on in hurrying wretchedness, feeling the ploughshare of her contempt cutting its clean furrows through his heart. "I was to meet him and bring him down here as my friend; and then—then you were to—to be free to act as you—as you thought good."

As he spoke, the futility, folly, and chimæra-like quality of the project he was unfolding broke upon him with a force and vehemence that, strongly as he had always felt upon the subject, it had never done before. There followed two or three intolerable moments of silence upon his exposition. Then Lucia said, with as cutting a quality in her voice as of a Toledo blade, and yet with a dreadful tremble in it too—

"It was a very remarkable plan; but I have yet to learn what right *you* had to interfere in it!"

"None," he said; "none," resisting as he spoke the impulse to cover his face with his hands. Then something—he did not know whether a fortunate or baleful instinct—drove him to add, "I thought you were very unhappy!"

At that she gave a proud hurt start, and the conviction flashed miserably upon him that instinct had led him wrong.

"And this is your way of improving my felicity!"

He did not answer; he did not even feel the temptation to answer that it was *not* his way; that it was a way into which, against his own sound sense, he had been most unwillingly dragged, and pushed, and threatened, and cajoled. He did not answer this because, though everybody agreed he was not a gentleman, he had some of the instincts of one. So he let the bitter jeer pass in silence. She was silent too, as if unable to better her last thrust, and in this perfect stillness around them the sudden sound of distant voices came plainly to their ears.

Lucia started, and, as if in fear of interruption, began to speak low and rapidly.

"I have not yet said what I came expressly to say. I do not know at what stage your—your project may be—what further steps you may have taken in it since—since it was communicated to me. But however far you may have gone, I must request —I think you will own that I have the right to *command*—that you stop short—that you undo, as far as you can, what—what you have already done."

Breath and word-power failed her, but Hatton's head had gone up. He was looking at her with a new light of hope flooding out the remorse and shame from his eyes. She had not heard, then! Of course, she had not heard yet! But if this were her real attitude, why should she ever hear?

Again came the sound of voices in the distance, rather, though not very perceptibly, nearer; and with that evident fear of interruption before she had delivered her whole soul before her, the woman caught her laboured breath and hastened on.

"If the whole thing were not so unspeakably degrading—so—humiliating, it would be too ridiculous for words. *Such* an edifice, built upon *such* a misconception!"

Again she stopped, gagged by her emotion; but though her tongue temporarily played her false, the flame of her eyes and the pulsing of her thin nostrils gave her their incorruptible testimony. And presently speech, too, came back.

"It is strange that you, who have seen so much of—who have apparently been so intimate with my niece"—the use of the formal title instead of the familiar "Gwen" brought home to him the depth of the gulf that this hideous half-hour had opened between them—"should not have discovered that common sense was not her leading characteristic! Out of a few facts that she accidentally learnt"—the stream of words, so rapid just now, was flowing with sluggish difficulty as through hampering weeds of memory—"out of a great many conjectures and suppositions, she has built up this unspeakable fabric of folly! has credited me with wishes, with regrets, with——"

Again the rebellious tongue refused its office.

It was too strong for him. Without any conscious volition on his part, he rushed in—

"Which you have not felt?"

There was such an uprush of hope and joy in his voice that she looked at him in stupefaction. But he had burnt his ships. After all, he was a child of nature, a wild man of the woods, not bound by the conventions of civilization.

"Is it possible," he said with an anxiety in his voice so intense as to override all sense of the unpardonable nature of his question, "*that you do not wish to have him back?*"

"How dare you ask that question?" she said with a sudden, final flash of maiden pride, wounded to the death. Then the steely strength that had held her up seemed to snap, and with a lapse into sudden tears, she flung her face down into her hands, sobbing out—

"The past is past! God Himself cannot bring it back!"

CHAPTER XXXI

The day was not much older when the inhabitants of Baskerville, with such of their guests as still lingered, were gathered in the hall to speed the departure of Mrs. Church and her daughter.

"It seems physically impossible for her ever to be in time for anything," the former was saying, with a sound of repressed champing in her voice. "I told her last night that I particularly wanted to be off early."

"She was very tired," Anne put in, in vicarious palliation of Zillah's offence, her soft voice softer than usual by reason of the many tears that had lately washed it at the thought of the imminent parting with Mamma—"very tired after that long drive!"

"*Long drive!*" repeated Sarah, in a key which had a decided edge to it. "Why, she only took Reuben to the station!"

"Oh no; she went a long drive after that," Anne said, still with that meritorious, palliating intention. "The chauffeur told her that he found he *could* take the car along that by-road to Wilchester, which she had always wanted to go; and when they had got

halfway there, in the narrowest part of the road, they met a corn-waggon, and they had to back into a field, which delayed them. And then somebody directed them wrong, and they lost their way, and found that, instead of being on the road to Wilchester, they were within half a mile of Adborough; and Zillah thought that, as they were so near, it was a pity that she should not take the opportunity of seeing the church. But it was some time before they could find the sexton; and, when they had, he had mislaid the keys. And, in fact, they met with a hundred *contretemps*. I should not have known anything about it, only that I happened to be dressed rather early, and I met Zillah coming in at the garden door just as it was striking eight."

Mrs. Baskerville had told her tale in the innocency and amiability of her heart; and upon it there followed a somewhat brooding silence.

Jane Swinderby began to say something, but apparently altered her mind about it, and stopped; and the first comment came in the quavering voice of the octogenarian butler, whom Anne and Freddy had neither the heart to dismiss nor the money to pension.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am," he said, addressing his mistress with exasperatingly slow and wheezy deference; "but I am given to understand that Miss Church is not up yet!"

"Not up?" "Not up yet?" "Why, it is twelve

o'clock!" "Not up?" In different tones with varying modulations of anger and incredulity, these ejaculations broke upon the old man's ear, but he stuck to his text.

"Miss Church gave orders last night that she was not to be called till she rang; and she has not rung yet!"

"*Not rung?*" "*Not rung yet?*" "*And it is twelve o'clock!*" Once again the chorus of amazed ejaculations burst forth.

It was met by a courteous, but firm amplification of the former statement.

"Miss Simpson has been up several times, and has knocked loudly, but she has not received any answer; and she did not like to go in without permission."

There was a pause. This time Jane did not even begin a sentence. It was Zillah's mother who asked, in an odd voice—

"Was the door locked?"

"I do not know, ma'am. I am not aware if Miss Simpson tried it."

There was a moment's silence, nobody attempting to offer any solution of the mystery.

"There must be some mistake!" Mrs. Church said, still in that unknown voice. "I will go and see for myself."

She made two steps towards the door, then suddenly sat down.

"Let me go for you!" Gwen cried, rushing into the breach in a storm of good-natured concern. "It will be cleared up in a minute. It is all some stupid muddle!"

She was gone, and the rest of the party remained as if fixed in the positions they were occupying, something in Sarah's face forbidding Anne to approach her with encouragements or smelling-salts.

Even at this tense moment, the thought uppermost in Mrs. Baskerville's mind was thankfulness for Mamma's absence. Mamma was never allowed to be present at *partings;* and though this one was of the most modified nature, since she and Sarah would probably meet in London to-morrow, yet it was best to be on the safe side, and if there was going to be anything disagreeable——

There certainly was; for at this moment Gwen reappeared, her habitually laughter-lit rosy face whitened and gravened almost beyond recognition, and with a note in her hand.

"It is for *you!*" she said, bending over her aunt, and speaking in an almost reverential lowered voice. "She is not there; but I am sure that this will explain everything."

There was a breathless silence, the "assistance" involuntarily closing round the centre of interest; while Mrs. Church—it seemed a work of difficulty—with a fumbling attempt at haste, tore open the envelope. A moment later the paper it contained

had slipped to the floor out of the reader's undetaining fingers, and her family, now clustered round her, could plainly read, as it lay on the carpet, the first sentence—

"I thought I could stand it; but I find I cannot; so I have gone!"

In the excitement of the moment, nobody made a pretence of not having read a communication which, after all, was not addressed to them.

"*Gone?*" "Where has she gone?" "When?" "By herself?" "With anybody?" echoed in different keys through the lately so dumb hall.

Roused by their voices, Sarah put out her hand with a blind gesture.

"Give it me!" she said. But when her request was complied with, and her eyes rested on the paper, she shook her head. "I can't see it!"

"Shall I read it to you, darling?" Anne cried out, flinging herself on her knees beside her sister, and passing her arm lovingly round her waist, and, at a wordless assent—poor Sarah was beyond speech—she read, "I thought I could stand it; but I find I cannot; so I have gone!"

Partly from agitation, partly with the idea of softening the blow to her hearers, Mrs. Baskerville had lowered her voice, and there was again a general drawing nearer of eager listeners.

"I did not dare tell you or father how dreadfully I hated *him!*"

Even at this moment there flashed in ironical vividness across the mind of poor Mrs. Church's sisters the memory of her frequent complacent boasts as to her perfect knowledge of the innermost recesses of her children's hearts, and of the absolute reciprocal confidence that reigned between them. But there was not much time for reflection before the next sentence, read by Anne in a voice of horrified incredulity, burst like a bomb among the assembled company.

"Mr. Hatton will tell you anything you want to know!"

"*Mr. Hatton!*" "What does it mean?" "There must be some mistake!" "You must have read wrong!" "What has he got to do with it?" "Where is he?" "Is he gone too?"

These sentences, wildly intercrossing, shot out from as many mouths, and, in place of the strained listening of a minute ago, there was suddenly a tempest of uplifted voices in the hall.

Sarah had struggled to her feet, and stood supporting herself by the arms of the chair on which, at the first shock of the tidings, she had sunk.

"This must be cleared up!" she said with hoarse authority. "Somebody must fetch him."

There was no need. Scarcely was the summons out of its utterer's mouth, before Hatton stood before her.

"*Is—this true?*" she asked, smiting the note

which she had snatched out of Anne's hand, with a shaking forefinger.

"Yes."

"You knew of it? You were the agent? You helped her?"

"Yes. She asked me!"

There was a paralyzed silence. It was always difficult in Hatton's case, owing to the deep tan of his naturally fair skin, to say whether or not he had paled under the ordeal to which he was exposed. He gave no other sign of flinching, but stood very upright, with his shoulders squared, looking them all full in the face. They looked back at him in stupefied silence, the effect of the bomb plainly visible in the varieties of horrified incredulity depicted on their faces. It was he who spoke again, in a not loud, but perfectly firm and audible voice.

"It was like this. I have been seeing a good deal of her while she has been sitting to me; and we got talking about different things; and from that we got on to her affairs, and she told me how miserable she was at the idea of marrying that old Jew gentleman, how dreadfully she hated the sight of him, and that she felt she must scream if he touched her! That did not seem a very good spirit to begin married life in, did it?"

He paused, looking round in impartial appeal at the company generally. But there came no answering sound.

"I advised her to tell her parents, but she seemed scared to death at the bare idea. She said she never told them anything."

At this fresh illustration of the truth of poor Sarah's oft-repeated boast of the absolute confidence reposed in her by her children, Jane and Anne both stole a look at their unfortunate sister. She was standing with a face like a mask, stolidly staring at Hatton, and they could not judge whether, through having already reached the uttermost boundaries of pain, this new stab was or was not able to pierce her.

"At last—I suppose I did not seem very keen about the job—it came to her saying that if I did not help her she would throw herself into the river; and she looked as if she meant it."

Again he drew breath, pausing as if in hopes of some other voice breaking in upon his difficult monologue; and at last one did. It was Gwen's.

"Why in Heaven's name did she fix upon *you?*"

Hatton turned with an air of relief and gratitude towards his interlocutor.

"Because she had no one else to turn to, poor soul! and it made it easier my having known Tranby years ago at Pretoria."

"Tranby" was the name of Mr. Reuben Silbermein's chauffeur, and at the utterance of it a fresh shiver of horror ran through the group.

The brazenness of the announcement, the open and shameless confession of having been the prime promoter of the just-discovered enormity, seemed to freeze into even deeper silence that petrified knot of persons; yet it was the softest and weakest voice among them which at length lifted itself tremulously up.

"And this," Anne said, with a sort of wail, "is the way you have taken of acknowledging all our friendliness to you, by bringing disgrace upon us!"

At that he gave a start. "*Disgrace!*" he repeated; "what disgrace?"

But Mrs. Baskerville's one effort at invective was drowned in choking tears. How *was* Mamma to be told?

It was Jane who stepped into the breach. "You have probably a different definition of the word from ours," she said cuttingly. "But we are prejudiced enough to think that it *is* a disgrace to have one of our nearest relations elope with a chauffeur!"

"Elope with a chauffeur!" he repeated, staring at Mrs. Swinderby with an astonishment too acute and profound to be under any suspicion of simulation. "What do you mean? The man only did as he was told. He drove her, as he has done on many other days, to meet her engaged lover—her husband by now—they were to be married before

the registrar at eleven o'clock this morning, and," with a glance at a neighbouring timepiece, "it is half-past twelve now!"

He looked round with an air of relief at the accomplishment of a difficult task, as he pronounced the last words, and a sort of shiver as if of wind in tree-tops ran through the listeners. It also partook of the nature of relief.

That Zillah should have utilized her elderly *fiancé's* splendid motor to convey her to her wedding with her young lover, was an outrage upon taste and decency; that she should have eloped with a penniless and deeply indebted Guardsman, was *lunacy;* but either was a light thing compared with the crime of which she had been acquitted; added to which the gorges of most of those present had always risen against the Silbermein sacrifice.

It was Gwendolen who voiced the feelings of the party.

"So she has pulled off her Jack after all!" she said in a voice which, though low for her, was clear and ringing. It is regrettable to have to state that, under her breath, she added, "Bravo!"

The words, though happily the final expression of triumph was inaudible to her, seemed to turn Zillah's mother back to flesh from stone.

"It is impossible!" she cried, beginning to pour out words with hoarse volubility. "It cannot be too late! They must be followed—overtaken! My car is

still at the door! I will go myself—at once! The police must be communicated with! I——"

She stopped, and began to fight the air with her hands, then—since they had seen what must come—fell back into the arms of her sisters, happily freed from the consciousness of her woes for a time by a deep swoon.

Hatton moved towards the door, unnoticed in the agitation and stir about the fallen woman. He passed through it, and reached the fly, standing luggage-laden, with Diego looking anxiously out of its window, which was to convey him to the station. As he did so, he found that Gwen was at his side.

"Well, you *have* done it this time!" she said.

Despite the disapprobation implied in the words, there was an odd glint of fellow-feeling in her eye.

"Yes."

"And you are not ashamed or sorry?"

He looked back at her half sadly, and yet with a great underlying gladness shining through the surface melancholy of his face.

"I am sorry that your mother thinks me ungrateful! I never was that sort! I thought I was doing you all a good turn!—all but——" He made a movement with his head, as if vaguely indicating Jerusalem.

"Oh, mother will be all right!" Gwen cried reassuringly. "She could not quite stand the

chauffeur—a very illiberal prejudice, of course !—but *now* she will think it all right ! She is such a mass of sentiment ! And meanwhile you do not look in the least contrite ! You look as if you had heard a piece of good news ! "

A smile seemed to rise from some joy housed in the very depths of his being, and " And so I have ! " he said.

CHAPTER XXXII

EPILOGUE

Despite Bob Swinderby's prophecy that "Mamma would see them all out," Mrs. Granard did not quite reach her seventy-first birthday, dying, or to speak more fitly of so gentle an exit, *withdrawing* before her daughters had got to the acutest phase of their annual anxiety as to the choice of her *fête*-day gifts.

Mamma's end was as judicious and tactful as had been the whole course of her life.

In spite of Anne's almost hysterical denial of the fact, there was no doubt that Mamma's hearing was just beginning to be not quite so fine as it had been, and a horrid whisper of the approaching need of spectacles to desecrate the bridge of her beautiful nose had carried consternation to her daughters' hearts. Mamma saw that it was time for the curtain to be rung down.

No close of a fair summer day was ever freer from inharmonious accessories. With none of those distressing preliminaries of tears and lamentations which would have been so distasteful to her,

Mamma's sun serenely set. She was found by Lucia, on her return from some trifling commission on which Mrs. Granard had sent her—how deep was the daughter's after-thankfulness that it was no errand of her own that had caused her absence!—lying peacefully smiling, with closed eyelids, as in one of those brief light slumbers that of late had sometimes overtaken her—lying in her graceful final sleep.

* * * * *

When the first violence of Lucia's grief—a grief most gratuitously embittered by remorse—was past, she married Hatton, all doubt as to the demise of the earlier occupant of the situation having been removed; and was thereupon decisively, logically, and finally cut by the Churches.

In the course of her education of her husband, she bullied him a good deal, which he took with ecstatic gratitude, and which she also enjoyed. Diego was sent to an English school, where he fought in succession six boys much bigger than himself, for calling him, with that largeness of characterization and contempt for shades of difference which marks the noble Anglo-Saxon youth, "a dirty little darkie!"

Miss Baskerville never recovered the defection of her Jessie—at least, she never recovered her faith in the creed of celibacy, brutally shaken to its foundations by the product of Bart.'s. Her pendulum, in fact, swung so far in the other direction that

she married a lord, and became a Philistine; but she always remained very good-natured, and could never harden her heart to refuse the far from infrequent appeals for pecuniary help made to her by her cousin Zillah and "Jack," who lived in great luxury if not comfort, upon nothing at all.

The only serious subject on which Gwen and her easy-going husband ever differed was his inability to dissuade her from sympathizing with her father in his expensive *amourettes*.

FINIS.

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